

I would like a tour of the White House. Sure I would! I would also like to leap over tall buildings at a single bound. No one but the President and his family and their special guests have that kind of access to the White House. Come to think of it, no one but my family and I and our special guests have that kind of access to our house.

I would like to spend a summer in Shanghai. That's easier than getting into the White House, but living in Shanghai for three months is no walk in the park either. We'll need lots of money, airline tickets, the proper papers, a place to stay when we get there, people who speak English there, places to buy groceries, the way to access health care, public transportation, car rental, banks, maps, and on and on.

Why do we think it is easier to get into heaven than it is to get into the White House or spend the summer in China? We talk about heaven like it is a public playground. People waltz in and out as they please. Please! Get serious! Nothing in life justifies such a picture of heaven. Based solely on our experience of reality here, wouldn't it make sense to think that entrance into heaven would require at least an invitation from the Lord of heaven?

Resurrection

These questions are closely connected to the next theme in The Apostles' Creed. We confess these words toward the end of the creed. "I believe in the resurrection of the dead." Jesus expanded the idea of resurrection to include everyone. Listen to this passage from John 5:25-29. Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.**

"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Let's live with Jesus' words for a few minutes. He does not come across here as a sweet, gentle thing that wouldn't harm a fly. He said of Himself that the Father **has given him authority to judge. Judge** is a strong word. It demolishes the idea that heaven is a kind of public playground where you can come and go at your leisure.

When we hear his voice and come out from our graves with soul and body reunited and personality intact, it will be decision time –not our decision time about Him, but His decision time about us. Entrance into heaven will be at stake.

I occasionally hear people say, "I'm not afraid of death, but I am afraid of dying – all the pain and mess and inconvenience." That's not a serious statement. You are about to stand before the Judge of all the earth, and you are less concerned about that than you are about the pain and mess and inconvenience of dying?

Jesus said that when the Judge of all the earth takes care of business, **those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.**" Is your first response to that to say, "I've done good; I haven't done evil. I'll be okay?"

If that's what you think, I'd like to ask you a question: Who is keeping score of the good and evil in your life, you or God or, for that matter, the people who live with you day in and day out? My experience is that when the people who live with me day in and day out tell

me the unpleasant truth about myself, I am stunned at how blind I have been to my failures. And people don't often tell us the truth about ourselves. They don't know it, and when they know, it's too risky to say. You lose friends that way.

But what is it going to be like on Resurrection Day **when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ?** (Romans 2:16) I have a feeling we are all going to be scrambling. My most human reaction is to say, "Please, don't tell my secrets!" I wish I could tell you that things get better as you get older. That has not been my experience. The longer I live, the greater clarity I have about my past failures, which I hardly noticed for years, and which I can't undo. And my heart! What shall I say about my heart? It is a kennel of lawlessness that can be locked up and quiet for years, and in a single day my vices suddenly yammer and howl to be let out and run free.

I believe in the resurrection of the dead, and on that day, when the books are opened, and when my turn comes before the Judge of all the earth to hear His account of my life, I just hope I don't trot out some pathetic list of my good deeds to impress heaven. **"The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.** (Hebrews 10:30-31) If I have any wits left about me, I will cry out in fear and trembling, "Lord Jesus Christ, be merciful to me, a sinner!" and I will throw myself upon **the kindness, tolerance, and patience** of God.

Everlasting Life

The last confession of the Apostles' Creed says: I believe in life everlasting. A famous, central New Testament text that bears witness to this reality is John 3:16. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.** Everlasting life! We don't think about it often, do we? It's too hard. I have spent my share of time with families who were burying a loved one. That's when you hear people try to describe everlasting life in heaven. "I can just see old Bert up there, taking infield practice with the guys."

By the way, I don't say that to mock. It's the first time most people have tried with their adult imagination to put in words everlasting life. They are trying to relieve their sadness and picture a condition for which we don't have many pictures. So, let's be tender and tolerant with people as they say farewell to their loved ones.

Many years ago, I read a book to my children called *Tuck Everlasting*. It's the story of a girl who meets and falls in love with a 17-year-old boy. She is too young too marry, and he and his family have a secret that she learns. The boy and his family have found a spring of water that makes anyone who drinks the water immortal. They don't die. They can't die. They can't be killed. They invite the girl, when she turns 17, to drink the water, marry their son, and live with them. It is a disarmingly profound story.

One great sadness emerges in the story. The immortal family is desperately unhappy. All their friends have died. They never aged from the moment they drank the water. They don't want the wrong people to be afflicted with immortality, and so they have to keep the spring of water a secret, and they live in hiding for fear of being found out. Immortality under our present human conditions is worse than death.

The world as we know it is incompatible with everlasting life. The biblical revelation,

which is not much more than a rumor from heaven, points to changes in the world as we know it, which will make it compatible with everlasting life.

Peter spoke about the ascension of Christ into heaven. He said: **“He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”** (Acts 3:21) John wrote: **We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.** (1 John 3:2) The book of Revelation says: **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.** (Revelation 21:1) Most crucial for that new earth is this: **Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.** (Revelation 21:4) His presence creates the conditions proper for creatures like us to have everlasting life.

Take-aways

I'd like to end this series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed the way I began it – with a comparison between the secular creed of our world and the Apostles' Creed. We are living in the last days. The last days are not about a date on the calendar but about decisive conflict for the heart and soul of nations. The last days are the times when Jesus is patiently exerting His authority to govern the nations, and His authority is being contested in every way imaginable. Behind this decisive conflict are opposing beliefs.

Here are 18 beliefs that fuel this spiritual warfare. I believe that:

1. Science has disproved Christianity.
2. Christianity is a form of wish fulfillment.
3. Death is the end of me.
4. People with strong beliefs just want to control other people.
5. Religious education is a form of child abuse.
6. Christians are hypocrites.
7. It's okay to bash Christianity but not other religions.
8. Science has nothing to do with morality.
9. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere.
10. Feeling good matters more than doing good. If it feels good, do it.
11. What consenting adults do behind closed doors is no one else's business.
12. Science will conquer nature and bring in Utopia.
13. I believe in the authority of TV and the Internet.
14. Thou shalt covet, thou shalt buy, thou shalt consume, and thou shalt do it over and over, or the economy will collapse.
15. I deserve what I have, if what I have is good.
16. I don't deserve what I have, if what I have is bad.
17. My problems would be over if I won the lottery.
18. If you have your health, you have everything.

Every item in the secular creed takes something true and distorts it. Health matters, but if you make health the most important part of life, you become unhealthy. What consenting adults do behind closed doors is private. But to say it is only private begins to unravel the moral fabric of a community. Science has enormous explanatory power, but trying to disprove God by

using science is bad science.

This creed bombards us everyday through television, the Internet, movies, politics, and peer pressure. Yet millions of Christians push back against secular beliefs with deeply held Christian beliefs. Coming down through the ages, the following beliefs enable God's people to resist the dogmatic, secular beliefs of our age.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried.
The third day, he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And sat down at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.

Strong people and strong churches stand for something. What they stand for is their core. They are willing to declare publicly what they stand for. They try to understand it. They want to know how it copes with change. They want to find out how it stacks up against beliefs and values that contradict it. Let us hold on to these convictions, and **we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.** (Ephesians 4:14)