

What do I have to believe to be a Christian?

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“What do I *have* to believe to be a Christian?”

If you have been part of a church for any amount of time or spent even a few minutes surfing Christian blogs or church websites, this is a question you will encounter *ad nauseam*. The question itself is loaded, since it assumes one *has* to believe *something*. The only question to be wrestled with is what that *something*

is. Our answers will usually illumine the things we value most while simultaneously sorting out who is “in” and who is “out.” This is a game humans (and animals) love to play. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we might discover upon reflection that much if not most of our identity is rooted in who we distinguish ourselves over and against. I am not *that*. I am not *them*.

And so it is that when we hear someone in the Christian community say something like “Doctrine is important” or “What we believe matters” we are naturally inclined to hear those sentiments in an exclusionary way. We assume that person is playing the game we all love to play (even though we all try like mad to pretend as though we aren’t players!). We assume the words *doctrine* or *creed* are dividing words, systems of an old regime that pit one people against another, draw lines in the sand and dictate what one must believe to be part of the club.

Our suspicions of the words *doctrine* and *creed* are not without merit. The record will clearly show from present day to as far back as anyone cares to look that we have used doctrines and

creeds in authoritarian ways. Sadly, in many cases, we have lorded over others maliciously. We have good reason to be cautious.

Those who love the game of “Who’s In or Out?” have co-opted the words doctrine and creed (an easy thing to do) and have insisted there are certain things one must believe to be a Christian. Those who were cautious and suspicious of those words to begin with because of the ways they are often used quite naturally resisted this Sorting Hat drama and, perhaps showing a bit of dramatic flair of their own, rejected the words outright, choosing instead an ethic of love alone. Of course, their rejection of doctrines and creeds only made the first group dig their heels in the sand even more, insisting that the second group *must* be *out* because, after all, St. Paul said a day would come when people would not put up with sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3). This only served to galvanize the second group, convincing them even further that nothing good can come of a faith built on believing certain things. It would be better if we just concentrated on *doing* certain things (which develops into a sort of *doctrine* itself, but I digress).

The problem with both of these groups is they both assume the question “*What do I have to believe to be a Christian?*” is the right question to be debated (if your answer to that question is “nothing” you are still ceding relevance to the question). I don’t think it is. The better question, and the one that I think is most faithful to the spirit of *doctrine* and *creed*, is,

What do I **get** to believe as a Christian?

When I look at the word “doctrine” in Scripture, which literally means “teaching,” I find that it is not a tool to divide but an invitation to live. St. Paul insists that we watch our doctrine closely, persevere in it, because if we do we will save ourselves and those who hear it (1 Tim. 4:16). *Save* is to be made well, to be healed, to be made whole. Doctrine, it would seem, brings life.

Titus 1:9 reads: He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can *encourage* others by sound **doctrine** and refute those who oppose it.

The word “encourage” is the word παρακαλέω, which can also mean “comfort.” The same root word is found in Jesus’ description of the Holy Spirit, *paraclete*, or Comforter/Advocate. Thus, doctrine not only heals but it comforts and encourages. Naturally, we are called to *refute* (or correct, reprove, convict) those who would oppose that which heals and comforts.

Another example is Jesus himself, who urges us to take his yoke (his teaching/doctrine) upon ourselves and learn from him, for “his yoke is easy and his burden is light” and in doing so we will “find rest for our souls” (Matt. 11:29-30).

So it seems that doctrine is that which heals, encourages, comforts, and brings rest for restless souls. That doesn’t sound like something I want to do without nor something I want to use to drive a wedge between myself and others.

By now you should be asking the question, “Ok, but what is this doctrine that heals, encourages, comforts and brings rest?” The particulars of how that question is answered will not be agreed upon by everyone, but I am convinced that it is the thing that we don’t *have* to believe but *get* to believe, and in so believing are compelled to tell the world about it and refute those who would claim something else.

We *get* to believe that God has not left us alone

We *get* to believe that God has acted definitively on our behalf in Jesus Christ.

We *get* to believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human, thus proving God’s relentless pursuit of his good Creation.

We *get* to believe that death, the last great enemy that makes us all restless, hopeless, worried and discomforted has been given a fatal blow on Easter morning.

We *get* to believe that Jesus Christ is the first fruits of what God intends to do for all of Creation.

We *get* to believe that history is moving towards something, that the injustice we witness today will be made right when God acts decisively within history again, just as God has in the past.

This is the good news that the Christian faith has to offer the world. This is the doctrine which brings healing, encouragement, hope, comfort and rest. It is the same sort of hope we find expressed in the earliest creeds. Doctrine and Creed are invitations into something cosmic that God is doing even now in our midst. We don't *have* to believe it. By the grace of God, we *get* to.

When doctrine and creed are seen in this way it should never be used to divide and conquer but inspire and invite. Likewise, as Paul instructs, we should speak up and refute those whom, perhaps for any number of reasons that seem good to them, diminish the hope and healing promises found in doctrine and creed when they deny God's saving act for all the world in and through Jesus Christ. To quote Paul once more, if Christ is not raised from the dead and our hope is for this life only, than we should be pitied more than all (1 Cor. 15:19).