

## **What Faith Must Believe**

This article on Matthew 28:18-20 is taken from the Ligonier Ministries

The Christian faith, in contrast to other systems, puts a premium on belief. To be sure, belief is important to other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam. Yet these religions are often known as “religions of orthopraxy,” or religions of right practice. Consistent with their merit-based views of salvation, these religions generally elevate the right performance of rituals over doctrinal precision and exactitude. Christianity, however, is historically a “religion of orthodoxy,” a religion of right belief. Creeds tend to be emphasized over rituals. Christians identify each other not by the number of daily prayers, the direction they face in worship, and so on, but by the content of what they believe.

Of course, we do not want to minimize the importance of right practice, for Scripture emphasizes the need to obey the Lord (Deut. 11; John 14:15). Nevertheless, there is a logical priority of belief over practice. Surely, what we do influences what we believe, but it is impossible to do what is truly right if we do not believe what is truly right. God puts a premium on our minds and our hearts because our thoughts and our loves determine who we are and what we do (1 Sam. 16:7; Ps. 26:2–3; Prov. 23:7; Isa. 26:3; Mark 12:28–30; Rom. 8:6; 12:2).

So, the Heidelberg Catechism is certainly correct to define people as Christians according to what they must believe — the gospel (Q&A 22). But what the catechism defines as the gospel is not simply the idea that we must believe in Jesus. After all, belief in Jesus cannot make us Christians if we do not believe in the right Jesus. Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and even Muslims all claim to “believe in Jesus.” Yet only the biblical Jesus presented in the gospel saves sinners. This gospel, the catechism tells us, is summarized in “a creed beyond doubt” — the Apostles’ Creed.

The Apostles’ Creed is a Trinitarian creed, which is not surprising given the emphasis our Lord places on the Trinity in His Great Commission to the Apostles (Matt. 28:18–20). Church father John Chrysostom writes, “Having put in their hands a summary of Christian teaching, which is expressed in the form of baptism, he commands them to go out into the whole world” (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT vol. 1b, p. 313).

We can imitate the example of Jesus all we want, but if we do not believe the gospel, we do not know Him. The gospel is simple — we are to put our hope of salvation only in the Son, who was sent by the Father and who pours out His Spirit on His people. At the same time, it will take an eternity to unfold the depths of this gospel. Let us continually return to the gospel and what it tells us about our triune Creator.