



**OUR CONSTITUTIVE FAITH:
3. ONE SAVIOR
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Romans 6:1-11

Have you ever watched a baseball game and noticed that when a runner gets to first base he has a chat with the firstbase coach? I cannot tell you verbatim what is being said, and probably could not get it printed even if I knew. But I know the gist. I can guarantee you that the coach is not trying to come up with something the runner has never heard before. Novelty is irrelevant. The coach is not trying to look insightful or intelligent. His job is to go over the obvious. Make sure the runner is aware of what he ought to have known anyway: how many are out; what to do on certain types of plays that might come up. Good baseball teams communicate with one another, going over the obvious facts, making sure that everyone is concentrating on the basic issues. We disciples need to learn how to coach first base.

I believe a dramatic revolution would sweep through our congregation if we regularly reminded one another to be more loving, if we systematically kept the reminder before us that Jesus is our Lord and **SAVIOR**. Unhappily we are often afraid to tell old stories, or share what we think people have already heard, and so we keep quiet. Then, Christians we thought were sure of their faith drift away and we discover too late that we should have been witnessing to them all along. We don't stay Christian by hearing only new and excitingly different ideas. We stay Christian by feeding on the meat and potatoes of faith.¹

It is precisely for this reason that we have been examining what it means to be Christian during this season of Lent. For the past few weeks we have looked at – reviewed basically – the core disciplines of beliefs as they have been handed down to us from the early church in what we call the Nicene Creed. This simple statement of faith contains the absolute essentials for every Christian to know and hold as holy in the system of beliefs in order to be called a Christian. Let me say that again: These beliefs are the barebones essentials in what the Christian must believe in order to be called a Christian.

The early Church determined quickly that there must be some set of criteria for which every Christian must agree, because there were already many different groups who were intent on bending the beliefs one way or another. As a result, there were many different flavors of Christianity. One group was touting that to be a Christian meant that you had to believe in so-and-so, while another group argued that you needed to do such-and-such in order to be a Christian. Emperor Constantine, a new convert to Christianity didn't understand how Christians could disagree so much over such issues, and ordered that there be a Council called to settle these and other disputes. They met in Nicea in 325 a.d., and for four months this council of bishops of the Christian faith ironed out the barebones necessities for what a Christian must believe in.

The charge was simple. If we don't know what we believe in, then anything goes, and we don't really have a faith. Plus, heresy, or the insistence that persons believe that which is not a part of the faith as a part of the faith, was a dangerous issue for the early Christians, struggling to identify themselves among other religions, and trying to be faithful to the one savior who had saved them. But when they finished meeting, they had a canon of beliefs, namely this creed, out of which every Christian could defend him- or herself against everything the world would throw at them. This forever established the nature of the Christian faith. And what is more important, it made the

believers, who were willing to live and die by the faith, extremely attractive to those who were curious.

In less than 100 years the fire of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was carried as far as Spain to the west, India to the east, and Ethiopia to the south. It subsequently took several hundred years for the Gospel to arrive in the northern reaches of Europe, but it did. Down through the centuries the flames of the Fire burned brightly. The Christian faith gained and its ranks grew because people who were attracted to Christ had their lives changed.

When people were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they came to know that peace that passes all understanding. The followers of Christ were known to demonstrate enormous courage under duress. Roman authorities tried to stamp out the Church by persecuting those who claimed Christ as savior. The plan backfired. Those who were torn apart by wild animals in Roman arenas for the entertainment of the emperor and his entourage faced their deaths so courageously that others were attracted to the faith rather than repulsed by it.²

It all comes down to understanding the nature of the Savior – Jesus Christ. The hardest thing for folks to realize is that everything Christ did, he did for us and for our salvation. The issue was sin – being drawn apart from God. Separated. Lost. And in the midst of this, God, in God’s gracious wisdom, offered us the possibility of being saved – through his only son Jesus Christ.

*“For us and for our salvation,
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.*

How else could God come to us and save us? The foolishness of the world is that somehow, people have the mistaken impression that they can save themselves. We believe that we can magically change our lives, our minds, our beliefs so that we will be free from sin. We believe in the mystery, not of God’s grace, but of the latest self-help book, the latest diet and exercise tapes that will strengthen and prolong life. But the world doesn’t seem to get it – you cannot save your soul by saving your body. The issue isn’t what’s on the outside – it is what is at the core of our being – our soul. And the disease that has attacked it is sin.

The Apostle Paul argues in his letter to the Christians throughout Rome that we, who have died to sin through our acceptance of the gift of Jesus Christ, cannot go on living in sin! In other words, according to Paul, if you’ve been baptized, your nature has changed – and in order to continue to live in your old nature, you are living a lie.

*For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

Paul argues that Christ’s death was a once and for all event – “the death he died, he died to sin, once for all.” Sin is no longer the issue for us. And even though we might believe that we could be saved from sin by some other means, Paul says, NO! He says, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The Second President of the United States, John Adams, said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for a government of any other.” In other words, unless our country remains Christian the Constitution will not function properly. Is John Adams right? Can our society survive without the Christian faith? There are many who would say that religion does not have the influence it once had. I agree. But they go on to say that religion is no longer relevant, that it is not necessary to creating a good world, that there are no absolutes, no objective truth. Are they right?

Dennis Prager, the Jewish social critic and scholar, says his favorite response to that question is a story, “Say you are walking down an alley at 11:00 p.m. in New York, Miami, or Los Angeles.

The dim streetlights illumine your car 300 yards away. Suddenly, you see ten young men wearing leather jackets swaggering down the alley toward you. Would you feel more comfortable if you knew that those young men had just come out of a Bible study?" Every time Prager has asked that question the answer has been 'yes.'

In spite of what they say in polls, on the most practical level, people acknowledge religion's positive influence. Our society cannot exist without Christianity. So if society cannot function, if indeed our very Constitution will not work without the restraints of religion, then let me ask you a more critical question: Can Christianity exist without the cross? No. Remove the cross from our faith and it is a house of cards. It will crumble under the slightest weight.

Because of the cross, we have been given the greatest gift of all – life. Abundant, full, grace-inspired life. In order for us to fully understand the need for salvation, we must know that without God's gift of Christ, and without that sacrifice on that cross, we can never know life. Only death, separation, destruction.

Our task as Christians in the 21st Century is simply to remind the world of the gift of God that has brought life to us. To tell the old, old story. Not in a conceited way, for we did not, indeed we could not ever earn it on our own, but as a gracious gift of God. "For us and for our salvation..." This is Our Constitutive Faith, in the name of the Father, the Son, (our Savior), and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ John Galloway, How to Stay Christian, Pages 136-137.

² Robert Cueni.