

Beginning

“I believe in God the Father Almighty.”

Genesis 1:1-5

I Believe: Timeless Faith worth keeping #1

Rev. John Hice

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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

The Conflict

I've been noticing medallions fixed on tailgate panels and trunk lids of cars and trucks here and there. Smarter-looking and more permanent than bumper stickers, these are insignias intended to outlast the life of the vehicle. You may have seen them. They are symbols in the shape of fish with an open tail; and many of them are also filled with silver lettering from the Greek alphabet. *ΙΧΘΥΣ* translates into *ICHTHUS*, which is the Greek word for *fish*. The fish has symbolized the heart of the Christian faith from very ancient days because the letters *ICHTHUS* is also an acronym for *Jesus Christ Son of God Savior* when it's spoken in Greek. So we have all these cars traveling our roads and streets bearing the heart of the Christian Faith.

Jesus Christ Son of God Savior: nice witness, so you'd think. Except not for some. More recently, strikingly similar medallions have appeared with these variations: instead of *ΙΧΘΥΣ*, the letters read, *DARWIN*; and if you look closely you'll see that cute little feet have been added to the fish. A message is easily inferred: “You're for Christ? You believe in God? I don't. I'm for evolution.” So Darwinists who are also atheists and Christians who are also creationists go at it again like two college football teams vying for the Big Ten title.

Now some creationists, not to be outdone, bear a new medallion on the fenders of their cars: it's a larger *ΙΧΘΥΣ* fish swallowing up a smaller and footed *DARWIN* fish. Go team.

This bumper badge banter belies a caustic contest that's been going on for decades. Since the hot days of July, 1925 with the Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee,¹ some from each camp have drawn a line in the sand, wanting to force everyone else to choose one side or the other. I pass by them on the road, or they pass by me; and though I understand the original fish bearers' desire make a witness, and I smile at the

creativity of the rest, I wonder, “Why the argument and why the one-upmanship?” Does having one fish eating another fish really come out of the same desire Jesus had when he did everything he could to give people God and abundant life? Or is it really an effort to say, “My side is right,” and “my side can outdo yours?”

Believing in God.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. The Israelites who first told this story lived in an age when everybody believed in many gods. Everyone believed if they prayed to these gods, they could somehow influence them, impress them, even tempt and trick them into doing what they wanted the gods to do.

Think of that: gods that control nature and events controlled by...us.

This was also an age when everybody thought that each tribe and nation had their own special god. In turn, the special god considered *that* people to be its own special people and he or she would teach them, lead them, protect them, do whatever necessary to give them victory in battle, and rescue them when they would get in trouble...So long as the god was pleased with the people at the time. So they did their best to please the god.

That’s why Moses stood at the burning bush and, getting his marching orders from the voice, he asked, “When I go to tell these people that their cries have been heard, *whom* shall I say sent me?” He wants to know the name. They all will want to know the name. Because they’ll want to know which god was going to be their god and even decide whether or not they want to give this god their time of day.

“Tell them YHWH sent you.” In other words, “Tell them I AM who I AM, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” It already sounds like this is a God who will do think and do what God wills, their will or not.

Then, when everything is said and done; when the people see plagues fall on the Egyptians and they are led in a mass escape unlike any other escape that has ever taken place; when they survive the long trek through the wilderness and are settled in the land and see promises fulfilled and that they are blessed beyond anything they had

ever dreamed: they reflect on who this God is.

This God is unlike any other god. This god isn't just here at our beck and call. This god is probably not to be controlled.

Maker of heaven and earth, source of all life: this god, IS God.

So, just as the people of Israel declared, *Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone*, the Church has repeated its creed. *I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth*. And some people, myself included, still say it like everything else we know depends on the truth of this one principle.

I believe in God.

A few months ago I took a walk after the Saturday evening worship service and ended up on Main Street. Of course, it was Royal Oak on a warm Saturday evening. Everybody was out, and I decided to go to the coffee shop. As I walked toward 4th Street I saw a group of people talking to each other, gathering on either side the walk in such a way that I thought, "I'm going to walk through their gauntlet and I just know that they are going to hand me literature."

I neared them and, sure enough, one of them caught my eye and held a gaze. "Here, we want you to have this," he said. So I took the leaflet, smiled and said, "Thanks." And I went on. I opened it when I sat with my coffee and what I read came as a surprise. It was a track in support of atheism and talked about why we shouldn't believe in God or go to church. I thought about the people on the sidewalk: they were passionate about what they were doing.

They didn't seem evil, really. In fact, you could say they even seemed religious. I thought about going back for a debate, to confront them about their beliefs or at least ask them why they believed the way they believed and just listen. Someday I might. But how likely is it that I or you or anyone would be able to convince them about God with an intellectual argument alone?

If they saw an IXΘΥΣ fish medallion eating their DARWIN fish medallion, do you think they would surrender?

It takes more than an intellectual argument. So I could go and listen and in going to listen I could try to be one in whom they'd catch a glimpse of God. Convincing, maybe, by trying to be like the God I know. I could pray for them. Perhaps that would do more good than out-debating them.

As far as believing in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth is concerned, though, that requires an encounter with God and a moment in which you are willing to see it.

*I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded.*² That's the witness of the people who wrote Genesis. Released from captivity and having endured the desert: they believed this was by the hand of God *because they were open to see it.*

In the end, what is convincing is not only that God created all this, but that God has loved you so much God claims you...like a parent who claims children, says "yes, they're mine," and then cares for them and protects them not because they ask it or earn it, but simply because they belong.

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded. I believe. So, I look at the stars swirling above me at night and cannot avoid seeing the hand of God who placed them there; nor can I miss hearing God's voice that sang them into being. I cannot look at a blade of grass jeweled by a sparkling bead of dew but know who crafted it. I cannot hear the laughter of a child but understand the miracle that brought her to be. I have heard the word of forgiveness and seen the Cross and I have known forgiveness...and love...and belonging. I am claimed.

And I know this because I know in my heart the story of Jesus, and in Jesus see something more than a great man with beautiful ideas.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth: and that belief has come to shape me, make me who I am, and send me in the direction I need to go. I cannot imagine life any other way.

Perhaps if Christians would be authentic with that, there would be no argument.

What Matters

I believe. Maybe the belief that holds us and molds us would be more convincing to others if we didn't have an IXΘYΣ fish that eats the DARWIN fish. Maybe it would be more convincing if we had an IXΘYΣ fish that just held the other fish's fin.

¹ For an overview of the "Monkey Trial", see "The 'Scopes Monkey Trial' – July 10, 1925 – July 25, 1925". American Studies at the University of Virginia website: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/inherit/1925home.html>

² Daniel W. Whittle, "I know Whom I have Believed" 1883. *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House. © 1989. p 714.