

The Apostles' Creed

I Believe

Selected Texts

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I Believe

Introduction

Today, I would like to continue with our new series of sermons on *The Apostles' Creed*. The Apostles' Creed is a statement of belief, and today I would like to explore some of the background to this creed. Please listen as I recite the Apostles' Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated 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.*

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town, I would often go hiking for several days in the mountains near Cape Town with a group of friends. My favorite area was the Cedarberg Mountains. In order to get from start to finish we would use two maps. One was a large-scale relief map, which marked all the

paths, bogs, crags, and so on in detail. This map gave us the fullest information about the area where we were hiking. The second map we used was a small-scale map, which left out the detailed geography and just showed us the trails and roads leading most directly from one place to another. We found that having both maps gave us the best help in successfully navigating the terrain.

If life is like a hike in the mountains, then the million-word long Bible is the large-scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-and-fifteen-word Apostles' Creed is the simplified small-scale map, ignoring much but enabling us to see at a glance the main contours of Christian belief. The Apostles' Creed, quite simply, is a summary of Biblical truth.

Review

Before I proceed with today's lesson, let me briefly review what I covered last week.

First, the word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, which literally means "I believe," and was the first word used in the Latin version of the Apostles' Creed. So a creed is simply a statement of what I believe.

Second, creeds were originally designed to be a statement of faith for a person who was about to be baptized. Over the course of time these baptismal creeds were incorporated into the worship service for recitation by the entire congregation as an expression of their common faith. And then, even later, creeds were used by a communion of churches to express their common understanding of the Christian faith.

Third, confessions differ from creeds in that they are much longer and much more detailed. They are much too long to be used in their entirety in a worship service.

And finally, creeds—and confessions too—are designed to define our faith, defend the faithful, and declare to the world the faith that we believe.

Lesson

Because the Apostles' Creed is a summary of Biblical truth, we should study it and be edified by the Biblical truths it contains and conveys. Let's approach our subject today by asking several questions: Who wrote the Apostles' Creed? How is the Apostles' Creed divided? What is the content of the Apostles' Creed? And, what is affirmed in the Apostles' Creed?

I. Who Wrote the Apostles' Creed?

First, who wrote the Apostles' Creed?

There was a time when some believed that the Apostles' Creed was written by the apostles themselves.

Stuart Briscoe, pastor of the Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, WI gives an example from a sermon that probably dates back to the eighth century. The sermon was an explanation of the Apostles' Creed, and this is what the preacher said:

On the tenth day after the Ascension, the apostles composed the creed. Peter said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

And Andrew said, "and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord."

James added, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried."

And Thomas said, "He descended into hell and on the third day rose again from the dead."

And James said, "And he ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father Almighty."

And Philip added, "Thence he will come to judge the living and the dead."

Bartholomew said, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

And Matthew added, "the holy catholic church, the communion of saints."

And Simon said, "the remission of sins."

And Thaddeus, "the resurrection of the flesh."

And Matthias concluded, “with the life everlasting. Amen.”¹

However, this is not what happened, and this view is fast losing popularity today. Even the Roman Catholic Church, which once argued that the Apostles’ Creed was written by the apostles, has moved away from that position in their 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.²

There are several reasons why the Apostles’ Creed was not written by the apostles. I shall just mention a few.

First, if the apostles had written the creed, it is inexplicable why Luke would not have recorded their actions in the book of Acts. This is particularly inexplicable if the apostles did indeed gather on “the tenth day after the Ascension,” as the eighth century preacher asserted.

Second, the Early Church Fathers, when they were embroiled in dispute with enemies of the gospel, would have certainly appealed to this creed—had it been written.

Third, it is unlikely that the Early Church Fathers would have produced so many other creeds and confessions if this one was already available. The fact that so many creeds and confessions were written in the Early Church suggests that the Apostles’ Creed was not yet written.

No, the apostles did *not* write the Apostles’ Creed. The reason it is called the Apostles’ Creed is not because the apostles wrote it but because it contains statements that are consistent with the teaching of the apostles.

The Apostles’ Creed most likely developed in the following way. The Early Church Fathers believed that Jesus gave a creed in the words of what we know as the Great Commission: **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”**

¹ D. Stuart Briscoe, *Apostles' Creed: Beliefs That Matter*, Foundations of the Faith (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), 4.

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City Chicago, IL: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; [distributed by] Loyola University Press, 1994). The Catechism states: “*The Apostles’ Creed* is so called because it is rightly considered a faithful summary of the apostles’ faith” on page 53, par. 194.

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(Matthew 28:19). This short statement was the foundation to which the Early Church Fathers frequently appealed.

For instance, Athanasius said, “The whole sum and body of our faith is comprised in the words of our baptism, and is founded on that scripture, ‘Go and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’”³

Augustine said, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, I say, after his glorious resurrection from the dead, and shortly before his ascension to the Father, bequeathed to the disciples these mysteries of faith, saying, ‘Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’”⁴

As pastors sought to teach their new converts and their congregations, they developed short creeds and statements which grew out of the Great Commission and were based on the truths of Scripture. By the second century AD something like the Apostles' Creed was in use by the churches, but it was not developed into its present form until the sixth or seventh century. It became widely used by the Western Church in the ninth century AD. From that time it has been used by churches to affirm their faith in the words of this creed.

II. How Is the Apostles' Creed Divided?

Second, how is the Apostles' Creed divided?

As the answer to Question 24 in the Heidelberg Catechism tells us, the Apostles' Creed is divided “into three parts: God the Father and our creation; God the Son and our deliverance; (and) God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.”

The first part is a brief affirmation of our belief in God as Father, as Almighty, and as Creator. It is an affirmation that God is

³ Herman Witsius and Donald Fraser, *Sacred Dissertations: On What Is Commonly Called the Apostles' Creed* (Escondido, CA Phillipsburg, NJ: The den Dulk Christian Foundation; Dist. by Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1993), 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

absolutely sovereign over all. He is the Creator, and we are his created creatures.

The second part is the longest. Here we affirm our faith in Jesus Christ, his person and his work. This part of the creed affirms that Jesus is the only Son of God. He is our Lord and Savior by virtue of his deity, conception, life, passion, death and resurrection.

The third part of the creed is a statement about the Holy Spirit. These articles are expressions of the Holy Spirit's work on earth and in the church.

We shall of course examine these parts in greater detail in the coming weeks.

III. What Is the Content of the Apostles' Creed?

Third, what is the content of the Apostles' Creed?

It is not my intention today to expound each of the articles of the Apostles' Creed. That, of course, is what we will be doing in the coming weeks. What I intend to do now is simply make two comments about the content of the Apostles' Creed.

*First, all the articles of biblical truth are **not** summarized in the Apostles' Creed.* For example, the Apostles' Creed says nothing about the Word of God, upon which our faith is grounded.

It says nothing about sin, the knowledge of which is absolutely necessary for salvation.

It says nothing about justification by faith alone, that great doctrine which teaches us about how we receive right standing with God.

It says nothing about worship, serving God, and leading a holy life, without which, the writer to the Hebrews points out, no one shall see the Lord (cf. Hebrews 12:14).

Nevertheless, all that is necessary for our salvation can be deduced or supposed from the articles that are in the Apostles' Creed. In that sense, then, all that is necessary for our salvation is contained in the Apostles' Creed, either explicitly or implicitly.

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And second, just as all necessary points are not expressly contained in the Apostles' Creed, so some of what it does contain is not indispensably necessary. For example, who would question the salvation of a person who did not know that Christ suffered under "Pontius Pilate"?

Or who would question the salvation of a person who did not know on which day Jesus rose from the dead?

Who would question whether a person is a Christian if he does not understand the article concerning Christ's descent into hell, or the Catholic Church, or the communion of the saints?

The point is that some of the facts in these statements are important in terms of giving us accurate and true information, but they are not absolutely essential for salvation. The Apostles' Creed is simply a summary of major truths.

IV. What Is Affirmed in the Apostles' Creed?

And finally, what is affirmed in the Apostles' Creed?

When people are asked what they believe in, they give, not merely different answers, but different sorts of answers. For example, "I believe in ghosts" means, *I think ghosts are real.* "I believe in socialism" means, *I think socialist principles are just and beneficial.*

But what does it mean when believers stand and say, "I believe in God"? Far more than when the object of belief is ghosts or socialism.

I can believe in ghosts without ever hunting one and in socialism without ever casting my vote. In cases like these, belief is a matter of intellect only. But the creed's opening words, "I believe in God," is a translation of a Greek phrase coined by the writers of the New Testament, meaning literally: "*I am believing into God.*" That is to say, over and above believing certain truths *about* God, I am living in a relation of commitment *to* God in trust and union. When I say, "I believe in God," I am professing my conviction that

God has invited me to this commitment, and I am declaring that I have received his invitation.

The word “faith”, which is English for the Greek noun *pistos* (πιστος) is formed from the verb in the phrase “believe into” (πιστευω), gets the idea of *trustful commitment and reliance* better than “belief” does. Whereas “belief” suggests bare opinion, “faith,” whether in a car, a medicine, a doctor, a marriage partner or whatever, is a matter of treating the person or thing as trustworthy and committing yourself accordingly. The same is true of faith in God, but in a more far-reaching way.

It is the offer and demand of the object that determines in each case what a faith-commitment involves. Thus, I show faith in my car by relying on it to get me places. I show faith in my doctor by submitting to his treatment. And I show faith in God by bowing to his claim to rule and manage me; by receiving Jesus Christ, his Son, as my own Lord and Savior, and by relying on his promise to bless me here and hereafter. This is the meaning of the response to the offer and demand of the God of the Apostles’ Creed.

Sometimes faith is equated with an awareness of the “one above” or “higher power,” which from time to time, through the impact of nature, conscience, art, being in love, or whatever, touches the hearts of the hardest. Whether they take it seriously is another question, but it comes to all—God sees to that. In theology this is known as *general revelation*.

Christian faith, however, only begins when we attend to God’s self-disclosure in Christ and in Scripture. This is known as *special revelation*. Here we encounter God who “commands all people everywhere to repent,” and to “believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. . . as he has commanded us” (Acts 17:30; 1 John 3:23; cf. John 6:28 ff.).

Christian faith, then, means hearing, receiving, noting, and doing what God says.

Let me make another comment about what is affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed. Even though the Apostles’ Creed is said in unison in the worship service, the opening words nevertheless are, “I be-

lieve,” and not, “We believe.” Each individual must affirm his or her faith for himself or herself. You cannot affirm with certainty the faith of another person. For, as Augustine said, “Faith resides in our innermost parts; no man sees it in another, but everyone may see it for himself.”⁵

Conclusion

Leslie D. Weatherhead once said, “The only creed that is worth two pence to you is not a creed that you tried to take over from your grandfather. The only creed that is going to be worth anything to you is the creed you built up out of your own experience of Christ.”⁶

A creed is a statement of personal belief. That is why it is so important that you know what it is that you are affirming. It does no good if you recite the words of the Apostles' Creed but you don't know what it really is that you are reciting, or worse, that what you are reciting is not an affirmation of what you truly believe.

Pastor John Beukema, of Western Springs, IL, said that their church rented a theater to watch *The Passion of the Christ* on opening weekend. Afterwards they gathered for dinner, discussion, and prayer. He returned home in a somber mood, deeply reflecting upon the sacrifice of Christ.

When he opened his mail that night, the first letter was from a local church, inviting him to visit their “special community.” They listed the ways they were unique:

- No religious dogma—We encourage the freedom of individual thought and belief.
- A humanist view of life—Our faith is based on celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992), Entry 2031.

- Warm, accessible services—Our Sunday services typically include a mix of readings, music, moments of meditation or contemplation, and a sermon.
- Our children’s religious education program—We teach our kids to be accepting of differing beliefs and the importance of each person seeking his or her own truth.
- We study the world’s major religions and draw on the core values of each faith tradition.

“So,” the letter concluded, “if you’re looking for a congregation that cherishes freedom of belief and opinion, with a warm sense of community and fellowship, please visit us!”

Pastor Beukema said that he had just watched the horrific suffering of Jesus and heard him say, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Hours later he opened an invitation to visit a group where truth doesn’t matter. The contrast was overwhelming.⁷

Friends, truth does matter. It matters a great deal what you and I believe. Studying the Apostles’ Creed will help you understand and clarify what it is that you believe about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ John Beukema, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

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