

The Apostles' Creed: Its History & Place in the Church (2)

I believe in **GOD THE FATHER** Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth (1)

I believe in **JESUS CHRIST**, His only begotten Son, our Lord (2)

Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (3)

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell (4)

The third day He rose again from the dead (5)

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty (6)

He will come again to judge the living and the dead (7)

I believe in **THE HOLY SPIRIT** (8)

The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints (9)

The forgiveness of sins (10)

The resurrection of the body (11)

And the life everlasting (12)

- In the previous study we began to see that confessional, creedal Christianity *is* biblical Christianity, in that it follows the clear pattern of God's people confessing their faith, evident in both Old and New Testaments.
- Furthermore we saw that creeds and confessions within the Christian Church are always and only dependent upon the Word of God. Dr. Cornelis Venema (Mid-America Reformed Seminary) has articulated this point well saying:

...the creed or confession is always subordinate in its authority to the Bible. The creed or confession can only echo the teaching of Scripture. However, that is precisely the reason the creed or confession must have its place. Believers, whether as individuals or in concert with other believers, **are obligated to declare what they have heard and believe on the basis of the Bible.** That's why the creed or confession has been called a "repetition of Sacred Scripture" (*repetitio Sacrae Scripturae*). In the creed or confession, believers offer their response, confessing as truth what they have heard in the Word of God. (*What We Believe*, p. 8 emphasis added)

- As we continue our consideration of the history and place of the Apostles' Creed in the Christian Church this evening, we want to begin by looking at multiple practical purposes served by creeds and confessions in the life of the Church.
- First, they have an **identifying** purpose. That is, they exhibit to the world where the Church is and who its members are. Often creeds and confession are called "symbols", meaning that they are something of an identifying badge. In other words, Christians believe *these* things (the things articulated in the creeds and confessions). If you find a congregation that confesses these truths, then that is a Christian congregation. You see, a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness congregation will have a Bible just like New Life Church, your local Baptist congregation, or a Presbyterian church. They will say that they "go by the Bible" just like a Christian congregation will. But unless a group is prepared to declare what they believe the Bible teaches about the person and work of Christ (particularly) then a claim to "go by the Bible" is meaningless. So, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, which seems to be a confessional summary, *For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.* Therefore, creeds and confessions serve to identify true Christianity and Christians.
- Secondly, and related to the first purpose, they have a **defensive** purpose. That is, as Venema has said, "They affirm in order to deny." In fact almost every creed and confession was written in light of attacks upon the truth. The Church stated what it believed positively so that the false teaching would be excluded. Indeed, as time goes on, heresies proliferate, requiring the Church to expand and further specify its creedal and confessional statements. Thus starting in the NT, we see the early confessional statements of the Church set-off on a consistent trajectory of getting longer and more defined as time goes on. For instance, the first Christian and most basic identifying and defensive creedal statement in the NT is, "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3). But by the close of the NT canon, this had to be expanded so that false teachers were excluded from the Church, as we see in John's instructions in 1 John 4:1-3,

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that **confesses** that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that **does not confess** Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*

You see, this later required confession includes the truth of the earlier statement “Jesus is Lord”, but now makes more explicit truth that about Jesus that was being denied. In other words, someone can have a high view of Jesus and acknowledge that He is “Lord” in some sense, but although they acknowledge that, they may still deny that He is God come in the flesh (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses). This pattern of ever-expanding confessional precision in response to false teaching—the later confessions always including the truth of the earlier confessions—starts in the NT itself and continues on to this day in the Christian Church. So, our creeds and confessions serve a defensive purpose.

- Thirdly, they serve a **unifying** purpose. Throughout the NT the Church is urged to have one mind and confess one truth (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2; etc.). Thus, in response to this call, the Church has articulated what it believes in unifying creedal statements. These have become known as the “ecumenical creeds” or “forms of unity”. Contrary to those who find themselves outside of those boundaries, our creeds and confessions have always aimed to be broad bases of unity, not narrow, exclusionary devices. Indeed, it is a very dangerous thing to find oneself outside of the boundaries of orthodox creeds and confessions. Having theological convictions that are not reflected in the creeds and confessions of Christendom is not a sign of superior exegetical skill...it is a sign of heresy; it doesn’t mean you’re brilliant...it means you are a heretic; it doesn’t mean you’re smarter than the rest of the Church...it means you are not part of it.
- Fourthly, they serve an **educational** purpose. At the Great Commission, Jesus called the Church to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them (Matt. 28:19-20), or by way of *Word* (teaching) and *Sacrament* (baptism). The Church took this seriously and in obedience to Christ began to catechize its members. The word “catechism” comes from the Greek verb *katecheo*. *Katecheo* is a compound word made of the words for *down* and the word *echo* or *sound*. Thus, literally, it could be rendered “to sound down”, meaning “to sink the sound deep into the ears or deep into the heart”. Thus catechism is the teaching of the truth of God’s Word, aiming at—by way of echoing that truth—rooting it deep into the heart of the student. Thus, in Acts 18:25 we hear of Apollos who *had been instructed* (katechemenos, lit. “catechized”) *in the way of the Lord*. At the beginning of Luke’s gospel (Lk. 1:4), he tells Theophilus that he is writing to him, *that you may have a certainty concerning the things you have been taught* (katechetes, lit. “catechized in”). Paul writes in Romans 2:18 that the Jews were *instructed* (katechoumenos, lit. “catechized”) *from the Law*.¹ Thus, again, following this biblical teaching, the Christ Church has always catechized its members by way of its creeds and confessions. Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Catechisms are structured on the backbone of the Apostles’ Creed.
- Finally and fifthly, they serve a **liturgical** purpose. From the very beginning, creeds and confessions have been used in the worship of the Church. Christians have corporately gathered and professed their unity and common faith by way of personal and corporate confessions of faith. We noted in the last study that the earliest record of something like the Apostles’ Creed is an early Trinitarian baptismal confession from about 150AD, which is based on Matthew 28:19, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”. Thus, a person must confess their faith publicly before they are baptized or received into the membership of the Church, and, they must affirm that they are part of the Christian faith by way of an affirmation of their belief in its doctrine before they come to the Lord’s Table (thus our practice of “session controlled communion”).
- So, seeing how our creeds and confessions rise from the Word of God and seeing some of their practical purposes in the life of the Church, we turn next to consider the history of the Apostles’ Creed.
- Some first question would be Where did it come from, and Why is it called the Apostle’s Creed?
- The original theory was that the Apostles wrote it, each contributing one of the 12 parts of the Creed (see above), but this is not the case. The earliest form of what is now called the Apostles’ Creed, was an old Roman creed from the 2nd Century. It finally reached its present form in the 8th Century and from that time has become the most used creed of Christendom, being confessed by millions of believers both individually and corporately, both daily in devotional time and weekly in worship services, throughout the world.

¹ See Daniel Hyde, *The Good Confession*, p. 18