

The Apostles' Creed

Introduction to the Apostles' Creed

Selected Texts

Rev. Freddy Fritz

April 25, 2004

Introduction to the Apostles' Creed

Introduction

Today, I would like to begin a new series of sermons. This series of sermons is titled *The Apostles' Creed*. I would like to examine this creed, which is recited every Sunday in many churches around the world, and which we ourselves frequently recite in our worship services.

Listen carefully as I recite the Apostles' Creed for you:

*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.*

The year is 173 AD. The place is Alexandria in northern Egypt. And it is the night before Easter. A group of Christians are meeting together in a church building.

A young man who has heard the gospel message of Jesus Christ is ready to be baptized. He has received instruction in the Christian faith, and he has embraced the Christian gospel. He stands clothed in white with some others near the water for baptism. The Bishop and Elders approach and ask him what he believes. He recites a brief summary of the Christian faith that he has memorized. The others about to be baptized recite the same summary statement.

The summary used by those about to be baptized was written by the Bishop some years earlier to help prepare new believers for baptism. The summary grew out of the Bishop's sensitive response to Paul's warning that from the very heart of the church some would arise that would proclaim a false gospel. Speaking to the Ephesian Elders Paul said, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

The Bishop knew that he was an overseer and a shepherd over one part of God's flock, and saw it as his responsibility to preserve the sheep entrusted to him. He saw the dangers that surrounded the sheep. The obvious danger to the flock was the pagan that not only denied the truth of Jesus as Savior but also persecuted Jesus' followers.

But there were other less obvious dangers as well—dangers from those who claimed to be Christians but taught false doctrines. Some said Jesus was not really a man with a physical body. Others said Jesus was only a man on whom the Spirit of God had come with unusual power. Many other heresies were being taught. Some of the false teachers had organized their followers into churches that they proclaimed were the true churches of Jesus Christ.

So the Bishop recognized his responsibility to protect the people and the truth from these false teachers. Again he was inspired by the words of Paul to Timothy: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13). The Bishop drew up a brief pattern or

The Apostles' Creed

“form of teaching” (Romans 6:17) specifically to summarize true Christian teaching in a way that would not only affirm the truth, but do it in such a clear way that followers of false teaching could not use it.

This summary was then given to candidates for baptism as part of their instruction in the Christian faith. The summary helped define the Christian faith more clearly for the new believer, defend the faithful from false teaching, and declare to the world the truths of biblical doctrine.

Now, the Bishop in 173 AD is imaginary, and his precise line of thought is conjecture. But by the end of the second century it is certain that local church leaders began to write brief summaries of the faith to use with candidates for baptism. These summaries are the earliest evidence for the emergence of creeds in the life of the church. These creeds were designed to define the faith, defend the faithful, and declare to the world what the church believed.

By the way, the word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, which literally means “I believe,” and is the first word used in Latin of the Apostles' Creed. So a creed is simply a statement of what I believe.

In time the creeds moved from being related to the baptismal service to becoming a part of the regular worship service. The whole congregation united in reciting the creed to express its common faith. According to Robert Godfrey, Professor of Church History and President at Westminster Theological Seminary (West), local churches initially developed their own creeds. But gradually they began to show their unity with other orthodox churches by moving toward a common creed.

The most familiar creed today is the Apostles' Creed. Elements in that creed probably go back to those baptismal creeds of the second century, although the Apostles' Creed did not become the most used creed in the Western churches until the ninth century.

Some people believe that the apostles wrote the Apostles' Creed. This belief is most likely due to the fact some of the early

commentators thought this to be the case. For example, Tyrannius Rufinus wrote one of the first commentaries on the Apostles' Creed in about 404 AD. Listen to what he said:

After our Lord's ascension (so runs the tradition of our forefathers), with the coming the Holy Spirit tongues of fire settled on the apostles individually. They were thus enabled to speak a variety of different languages, with the result that they found no nation strange to them, and no foreign speech beyond their powers of comprehension. The Lord then commanded them to journey separately to different countries to preach the word of God. When they were on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled on a common form for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely dispersed as they would be, delivering divergent messages to the people they were persuading to believe in Christ. So they all assembled in one spot and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, drafted this short summary, as I have explained, of their future preaching, each contributing the clause he judged fitting: and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to converts.¹

There is in fact no evidence that the apostles wrote this creed, although the Apostles' Creed is an accurate and faithful summary of the teaching of the apostles.

The Apostles' Creed is basically Trinitarian, confessing the persons and work of the Godhead. The Creed confesses the Father as the Creator, the Son as incarnate Savior, and the Holy Spirit as the One who applies the work of Christ to gather the church and to bring salvation. For the next three months or so it is my intention to study the Apostles' Creed in some depth in order to learn more about the persons and work of the Godhead.

Let me make a brief comment at this point about the other creed that we often recite here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church—the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was the best-known creed written in the first 500 years of the Church. This creed was

¹ Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1954), 29-30.

The Apostles' Creed

the first one universally adopted by orthodox churches. The Nicene Creed was adopted at the first ecumenical or universal council of the churches held in 325 AD. The council held at Nicea confronted a serious and subtle theological problem. A clergyman of the church in Alexandria named Arius denied that Jesus was fully and eternally God. The church recognized the need to define carefully the divinity of Jesus and did so in these well-known words:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Particularly in the declaration that Jesus was *of one substance with the Father*, the Church specifically rejected the heart of Arius' teaching and produced a litmus test to protect the Church from his false doctrine. The Nicene Creed has been invaluable to the Church, standing through the centuries as a clear testimony to the world of our commitment to the uniqueness and eternal deity of Jesus.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries built upon the creedal work of the Ancient Church. Reformation churches produced confessions to express and summarize their understanding of what the Bible taught. Lutherans wrote the Augsburg Confession. Anglicans prepared the Thirty-nine Articles. And Presbyterians drew up the Westminster Confession of Faith.

These confessions differ from creeds in that they are much longer and much more detailed. Generally, confessions also relate to a specific branch of the Church. So, as I said, typically Lutherans use the Augsburg Confession, Anglicans the Thirty-nine Articles, and Presbyterians the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Confessions are much too long to be used in their entirety in a worship service. They are like creeds, however, in the basic functions they fulfill in Christian churches, which is to define the faith, defend the faithful, and declare to the world the faith we believe.

Now, before I get into my lesson for today, let me address briefly the statement I sometimes hear in reference to creeds. There are some who say, "I have no creed but the Bible." Apart from the fact that this statement is in itself a creedal statement—it is a statement of belief, you see—what shall we say?

First, "no creed but the Bible" may be well intentioned but it is a gross over-simplification. If I were to say, "Fine, you believe that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible word of God, and that it is the only sufficient rule for all of faith and life. So do I. But tell me please, what *specifically* do you believe about the Trinity or about the dual nature of Christ?" then that person would then have to give me a summary of the teaching of the Bible on that particular subject. And that statement is in fact a creed. It's a statement of what he or she believes.

Second, every church needs two kinds of confessions. One is the basic confession required of every person who becomes a Christian, and that confession—in its simplest form—is that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God who alone saves from sin. The second confession reflects the church's understanding of the teaching of the Bible, particularly with respect to God and his redemptive revelation.

Third, and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough, every church has a confession or a creed. It is naïve to want to fellowship in a church that supposedly does not hold to a creed or confession. In a church that has a written creed and confession one can examine for oneself the truth of what that church believes. In a church that does not have a written creed or confession one cannot examine for oneself the truth of what that church believes. And there is a great difference between the two.

And fourth, the lack of a written creed and confession is more likely to lead to theological error. Here I must hasten to say that written creeds and confessions are certainly no guarantee of continued orthodoxy. Our own denomination was born out of a denomination that abandoned its fidelity to its own written standards. There is no guarantee that merely having written standards will

preserve us from theological error. But, it seems to me, not having written standards is far more likely to lead to theological error. In fact, in their book *The Bible in America*, Nathan O. Hatch and Mark Noll describe what happened in early America among people who said that they did not need the church nor the creeds and confessions in order to understand the Gospel. Doctrines and theologies became matters of private judgments or simply culturally determined, and hence, many turned to cults, liberalism, and other outgrowths of the “New Light Movement” of the time. The authority of the Bible actually suffered under such private and individual influence.

And so I say to anyone who says “No creed but the Bible” that the very things they seek to accomplish are in fact accomplished in the *use* of creeds and not in their *lack of use* of the creeds.

Lesson

Now let us examine in more detail the function of creeds (and confessions too, for that matter). As I mentioned earlier, creeds are designed to define the faith, defend the faithful, and declare to the world what the church believes.

I. Creeds Are Designed to Define the Faith

First, creeds are designed to define the faith.

Church historian Philip Schaff wrote in his book *The Creeds of Christendom* that “the first object of creeds was to distinguish the Church from the world, from Jews and heathen, afterwards orthodoxy from heresy, and finally denomination from denomination.”²

Creeds define with great care the beliefs of a communion of churches. Creeds are simply statements that summarize the teach-

² Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York; London: Harper, 1919), 1, 8.

ing of the Bible as understood by a communion of churches. They form a common understanding of what the Bible teaches.

Creeds and confessions reiterate the doctrines of God and the Trinity. They state their understanding of the person and work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They also present teaching of the authority of Scripture, of salvation, of the church, and so on.

In addition, the confessions of the Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, and others also specify the distinctive doctrines of those communions. In this way the confession not only distinguishes one communion from another, but also summarizes for a distinctive communion the common doctrinal commitment that unifies it.

For example, the churches of the Dutch Reformed tradition have three confessional documents—the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort—that together are called the Three Forms of Unity. Churches in the Scottish tradition also have three documents—the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism—that together are simply referred to as the Westminster Standards. Churches in these communions are committed to being united doctrinally by the teachings of their standards, which, it must be stressed, are simply summary statements of biblical truth.

That unity means that anyone deviating from those teachings is subject to church discipline. It also means that in areas not covered by the standards there is freedom for diversity in the churches.

II. Creeds Are Designed to Defend the Faithful

Second, creeds are designed to defend the faithful.

Creeds and confessions seek to protect the faithful from false teaching. Some confessions explicitly present and then refute false doctrines. All implicitly seek to defend believers by presenting biblical truth.

Creeds are short summaries of biblical truth. Confessions, which are longer, seek to draw together the whole range of biblical teaching on specific subjects. In this sense, creeds and confessions

operate in the arena of Systematic Theology. Creeds and confessions help protect Christians from the misuse of one verse of Scripture taken out of context.

Representatives of a cult speaking to a Christian in his living room may seem to have a few Bible passages to support their heresy. But biblical truth, defined in a creed, confession, or catechism, will provide the Christian with a solid defense against error.

III. Creeds Are Designed to Declare to the World

And third, creeds are designed to declare to the world.

Creeds and confessions declare to the world what the church believes. They present the biblical interpretation of the Scriptures of a distinctive communion of churches.

Sometimes making that testimony is dangerous. In the sixteenth century Dutch Calvinists summarized their faith in the Belgic Confession. This confession was thrown over a city wall as a testimony to Roman Catholic authorities. Its author, Guido de Bres, was later martyred for his faith.

Today confessions are usually not that dangerous, but they do summarize clearly what a church believes for any inquirer. Churches are fundamentally communities of faith, and doctrinal content is an essential element of that faith.

Conclusion

The wealth of biblical and theological material summarized in creeds and confessions make them ideal subjects of study for all Christians. Too often Christians neglect them. For some they seem too “doctrinal.” For others they are not “practical” or “life-related” enough. But today, nothing is more important for Christians than a clear understanding of the truth of the Gospel. All practical decisions about how to live depend on knowing God and his will and his ways. Creeds and confessions are invaluable resources to de-

fine the truth, defend the faithful from error, and declare the truth to the world.

Let me encourage you to study God's word and examine the Apostles' Creed with me so that you can define the truth, defend yourself against error, and declare your beliefs to the world.

The way you live your life depends upon what you believe. Someone may say that he believes in honesty, but if he does not disclose income to the IRS, one would rightly question whether his actions matched his beliefs.

In the next few months I invite you to examine what you really believe regarding God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I believe that getting your beliefs right in regard to who God is and how he is at work in the world can be utterly transforming. And, when the day comes that you have to go through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, it is in the end what you really believe that will show itself to you and to the world.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd.

Tampa, FL 33647

Office: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org