

# The Apostles' Creed

Part 1  
I Believe In

*With Study Questions*

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## Part 1 I Believe In

**And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. <sup>16</sup> He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15, 16).**

### Why a Creed?

Toward the end of the first century Roman citizens found themselves under the feet of the ever growing Roman Empire. The Empire had become so powerful and beyond human challenge that the Caesar's were revered as deities. In order to buy and sell, one was required to acknowledge the godhood of Caesar<sup>1</sup>. Citizens were to burn incense then publicly confess their belief in Caesar. The slogan utilized for this particular act was *Caesar eis Kurios* or Caesar is Lord.

History tells of a Christian named Polycarp who was the successor to the Apostle John living in the late first to mid-second century. Roman authorities sought to reason with the closed-minded Christian. "What harm is there" they asked, "in saying Lord Caesar, and to sacrifice, and thus save your life?" Polycarp responded with the words, "How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He then gave an answer which was the first and shortest creed in church history. Instead of *Caesar eis Kurios*, he firmly declared *Iesous eis Kurios* — Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3). This confession cost him his life, burned at the stake.

As we embark upon our study of the Apostles' Creed, the first question might be, 'why a creed?'

A creed is a summary declaration. We are not always given the opportunity for a fully-orbed explanation. A creed can be memorized and recited for the comfort of the Christian and the hearing ears of those who would be saved. The Roman authorities may not have been interested in a class taught by Polycarp for him to offer more detailed instruction. There is always more to be said.

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<sup>1</sup> Take his mark, so to speak, on the hand or forehead, demonstrating allegiance in thought and deed.

We recently attended a street faire where some men were doing street evangelism. One man approached a member of our party with the question, "If you had three minutes to address a person's eternal destiny, what would you say?" The question caught my attention. I blurted out, "Give them the gospel; it is the power of God unto salvation." He corrected me, "No, they must be told to repent." Sensing his adversarial tone I quietly (I think) responded, "I think that's included in the gospel."

My point here is there is always more to be said. There is so much left out of every creed that they should not be viewed as instructionally sufficient. For example, the Apostles' Creed goes from Jesus' birth to His death without one word about His life on earth.

Someone might ask, I have asked in the past, "is not the Bible sufficient?" The popular slogan gaining legs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was 'No creed but the Bible' or 'No confession but Christ'. It is catchy and, at first glance, appears pious. I don't say that tongue-in-cheek, I sincerely recited those words. Modern evangelicalism has retained this disdain for creeds. If I may address this briefly:

**1. Sola Scriptura is Creedal.** There is no place in the Bible where the sixty-six books of the Bible are listed. Sola Scriptura is indeed a creedal statement. Those doubting this must recognize there are close to a billion people on this planet who go by the name of Christ yet disagree with the sufficiency of Scripture – Roman Catholics.

**2. Biblical Precedent.** There are many places in the NT where formalized summaries of belief are taken for granted as aids to faith and practice. For example we read of 'what we preach,' I Cor. 1:21; 'the truth,' II Thess. 2:13; 'the gospel,' 1 Cor. 15: 1-8; 'the word,' Gal. 6:6; 'the doctrine of Christ,' II John 9-10; 'the sure word,' Titus 1:9; 'the standard of teaching,' Rom. 6:17; 'the traditions,' I Cor. 11:2; 'Traditions,' II Thess. 3:6; and even that which we 'confess,' I Tim. 3:16; the discussion of the elementary *principles* Hebrews 6:1, 2 and more.

**3. Everybody Has One.** There are two kinds of Christian, those who admit they have a creed and those who don't. A. A. Hodges states,

**The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.<sup>2</sup>**

**4. Respect for Teachers.** We should respect the teachers – not only of our current Bible study – but the teachers of history, which God has gifted for the edification His church.

**5. Fosters Historic Progression.** Confessions aid in the progression of the church from generation to generation. Creeds and confessions allow us to take advantage of the strides made before us.

**6. Provides a Basis for Church Fellowship.** A person seeking a church can quickly know what a church believes in many areas.

**7. Protects the Congregation.** Members are protected against their church making radical shifts from one pastor to the next.

## **A Brief History**

What do we know of the Apostles' Creed? First notice that the apostrophe is after the "s" indicating a possessive plural case. It is the doctrine of the apostles.

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest (Polycarp notwithstanding) and most widely used creed in church history. It was formed gradually from the 2<sup>nd</sup> (some think the 1<sup>st</sup>) century until its current form in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is called the Apostles' Creed, not because it was written by the apostles but because it contained the doctrine of the apostles.

It might be of interest to know that Roman Catholics do assert it was written by the apostles themselves after Pentecost and prior to leaving Jerusalem – each apostle contributing a phrase or article; Peter contributing "I believe in God the Father Almighty," John adding "Maker of heaven and earth" and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, 1869), p. 2

The Creed was used in the early church as a testimony of one's faith at their baptism. Unlike other creeds where the history gives us a clear understanding the controversy leading to their formation (Nicea or Chalcedon – addressing issues of Trinity and the divinity of Christ), little is known regarding what controversy might have lead to the formation of the Apostles' Creed.

We do know that it has been recited by our brothers and sisters in Christ since, virtually, the beginning of the New Covenant church. We, as a church utilize it in a cycle of things we recite during worship along with the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, etc. The highly esteemed 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Herman Witsius profoundly observes:

**In the Decalogue, or ten Commandments, God speaks to men; in the Lord's Prayer, man speaks to God; in the Creed, man speaks both to God and to man.<sup>3</sup>**

Now to the creed itself.

## **The Most Dangerous Word**

The first word in the confession (please don't fear, I don't intend to overly analyze each word) is *Credo* from which we get the word, creed; it means "I believe." I have come to believe that belief, trust, faith, (all related to the Greek *pisteuo*) has become one of the most dangerous words on earth.

The word means to place confidence in, to trust, or to rely upon. It is used hundreds of times in the Scriptures with the most blessed or devastating consequences. Jesus taught,

**Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.  
<sup>16</sup> He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15, 16).**

Why is it so dangerous? Because like so many words (choice, tolerance, discrimination, diversity) it has no content in and of itself. Belief

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<sup>3</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Reprinted 1993), p. 15.

is an instrument connecting us to life or death. It is like a bridge, or a tunnel or a pathway, which is itself not the destination but the means by which the destination is reached.

Believe (or faith) is a word hijacked by the enemy of men's souls and placed on bumper-stickers, as if it has inherent virtue. The starlet or singer may lament, "I am losing my faith," without considering what he/she may be losing their faith in. The losing of faith may be the best thing that ever happened to them. For when you lose faith in one thing, you will necessarily gain faith in something else – the gap must be filled. And this seems to be the big secret.

The Apostles' Creed begins *Credo en Deum* or I believe in God. What seems to escape the attention of fallen man is the necessity of *Credo en* being followed by something. Christians are commonly chastised for their adherence to their medieval religious convictions. I recall having a dialogue with an aggressive atheist who was angered by my faith and insistence that the taking of the life of an unborn child was murderous. He all but ordered me to keep my thoughts to myself and those foolish members of my congregation who forget what century it is.

In the course of our dialogue I repeatedly asked a simple question that he refused to answer: "Can you explain to me, according to your beliefs (a word he really didn't like) why it would be wrong to take the life of an innocent six-month-old or one-year-old child?" Neither science, nature, sociology or any other human discipline or observation can give an authoritative answer to that question. At the end of the discussion there must always be a *Credo en*. So the real question is not, 'do you have faith?' but 'in what do you have faith?'

## **Believe That/In**

Defining belief a little further, we make a distinction between belief *that* versus belief *in*. I may believe *that* there is a form of government called communism but it doesn't follow *that* I believe in a form of government called communism.

I may believe *that* there is a God, *that* there was a man named Jesus born of a virgin – I may even believe *that* He died and rose from the dead (the chief priests never doubted the testimony of the guards regarding "all the things that happened" at the tomb but sought to create a Passover plot

where the disciples “stole” Jesus’ body). But believe *that* is a world of difference (an eternity of difference) from believing *in*.

Belief in the true sense, in the non-duplicitous sense, involves the change of the whole man. Like the word ‘life,’ belief is a pregnant word, representing the entirety of a person’s convictions. What you believe *in* is why you will say your next word, think your next thought, agree or disagree with that which is written or said. The enemy’s ability to keep men ignorant of what follows *Credo en* is one of the most successful soul-destroying enterprises of his hateful vocation

## **A Leap of Faith?**

In the beautifully performed song *Defying Gravity* from the musical *Wicked*, the witch sings of her defying of the wizard and those who would keep her from realizing her full potential. In her rebellion against this evil, and in anticipation of her new journey she sings that she will “close her eyes and leap.”

As a pastor in a Christian church it should be no mystery that my desire is for the listener to believe in the God which will be defined by the remainder of this creed – the God of Scripture who sent His Son to rescue sinners from death and deliver them to eternal glory. But it has been mistakenly suggested that God calls man to make a blind leap of faith, as it were, into the darkness. The leap is not into the darkness but out of the darkness. And it is not a matter of blindly making decisions but, by the grace of God, opening our eyes to that which we continually suppress.

My little girl recently asked me a question – a question it seems only children ask. “How do we know the Bible is true, daddy?” Trying to find words that a nine-year-old might understand is difficult – especially if it relates to something being self-evident or self-authenticating. I gave her an analogy that wasn’t entirely sufficient, an insufficiency she picked up on. I told her that we know the Bible is true in the same way we know it’s wrong to steal or lie – truths, which at surface value seem self-evident.

She picked up what I was trying to say, realizing the weakness of the analogy. “How do we know it’s wrong to lie?” she asked. I answered, “Because God tells us in the Bible.” The point I was seeking to convey to my young daughter was that there is something God has done for man and in man, which is to reveal Himself and His attributes. But in the same way

the thief will seek to justify his behavior by suppressing the truth about stealing (something he may successfully accomplish) men will suppress the truth about God (something they can never accomplish – for they are without excuse – Romans 1:18-23).

So strictly speaking belief in God, *Credo en Deum*, is not a blind leap of faith into some darkness that we don't know, as much as it is a embracing of that which we know all too well but choose to reject because of our love of sin. Jesus explained:

**And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19, 20).**

God holds men culpable for that which they believe in and that which they reject. Yet we also recognize that our natural hatred of the light is only overcome by the grace of God working through His word and sacraments, pointing our minds and hearts to the power of cross of Christ – which, when it gets right down to it, is the central theme of any creed – the central theme of the Scriptures themselves. It is to this that we will focus our attention as we go to His Table.



## Questions for Study

1. What was the first and shortest creed in history (page 2)?
2. Why are creeds valuable (pages 2-4)?
3. Discuss the history of the Apostles' Creed. Was it written by the apostles? How was it utilized? (pages 4, 5)?
4. How are 'belief' or 'faith' dangerous words (pages 5, 6)?
5. What is the difference between belief *that* and belief *in* (pages 6, 7)?
6. Does God call men to make a blind leap of faith? Explain your answer (pages 7, 8).