

## Using the Apostles' Creed

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The word creed comes from Latin *credo* meaning “I believe.” When Jesus asked Peter, “But who do you say that I am?”, his response was the first informal creed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15-16).

Like Peter’s confession, a creed is a public confession and testimony, and not something primarily written down and tucked away in the 8-point fine print of the church constitution. As soon as you are asked a question about what you believe, the content of your faith, your response is some sort of creed. If you are at a loss for words or fumble out something about asking Jesus into your heart, chances are you don’t know the Apostles’ Creed, the Church’s first statement of faith used as far back as the generation following the apostles.

Since the Bible requires us to confess our faith (Matt. 10:32-33), from its earliest days the Church provided a doctrinal summary for instruction and public confession. While variations of the Creed were used as far back as the second or third century, they found common ground in the Trinitarian language of the great commission (Matt. 28:19), and eventually became standardized in the form we know it now in the sixth or seventh century.<sup>1</sup> The Creed has been used consistently and effectively on account of its clarity and utility.

I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the virgin, Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hades. On the third day He rose again, from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and sits 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 Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

No wonder Luther said “Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement.” The phrasing is straightforward and simple for public use, broad enough to cover the essentials of the faith, and yet specific enough to exclude many cults that want to retain the words of Scripture while distorting their meaning. Protestants rightly see creeds as a secondary authority, subject to Scripture, but possessing real authority as far as they submit to Scripture. The Creed boils down the Bible’s teaching about God, creation, redemption, resurrection and judgment into a few poignant sentences.

Like other early creeds, the Apostles’ is an ecumenical statement that brings all Christian churches together under the primary doctrines of the faith. This is an important use that guards against secondary doctrines, denominational distinctives or generational preferences becoming too important and used in a way to exclude believers from other

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1910; 1976), vol. 2, 529-33.

traditions. It's easy for individualistic Christians to become inbred and provincial, elevating their view of worship, eschatology, sacraments, child-rearing, carpet color, etc to a place of primary importance. The Apostles' Creed unites the local body with other churches throughout the world and the centuries. Unlike Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and other nineteenth century cults, the Church has a heritage that goes back. In contrast to eastern and new age religions, our God not only governs history but invaded it at a particular time, into a land ruled by a particular governor, and took on flesh in the womb of a particular Jewish woman. Christians are reminded that God rules the world in real time and always has—where we've been—and He will ultimately come back to judge the quick and the dead—where we're going.

The Creed also speaks pastorally to individuals in a surprising way. Instead of focusing on personal feelings or experience, the Creed turns us to the objective work of God in history on our behalf, which is the basis of all true experience. It calls us away from the subjectivity of our own lives to believe in what has already been accomplished definitively. In contrast to how many churches mumble together during worship, actually professing the Creed with love and vigor *is* an experience of faith. It's not so much an occasion to talk *about* our faith but a way to *practice* it.

Many evangelicals are suspicious of using creeds in worship, thinking they lack spontaneity and originality and lead to lethargy. But coming up with our own ways *de novo* to proclaim our love for Christ has not enriched the experience. All repetition brings the temptation of thoughtlessness whether it's three meals a day, showers, lovemaking, prayer, central heat, or opening prayer during worship. Because we are sinners, these regular gifts tempt us to forget the giver, but this shouldn't lead us to reject the gifts. In and of themselves, they are blessings and opportunities for gratitude. Even the most anti-liturgical churches develop their own traditions (in addition to the one about not having traditions). Having no creed but the Bible won't keep us from formulating our faith and expressing it during worship, but it will prevent us from doing it well. Doing anything in worship without knowledge and love is the path to vain repetition and empty religion. But knowledge informed by love leads us to commune with God richly. In the Apostles' Creed, we should see His promises to lead the Church into all truth actually fulfilled throughout the ages, and be overjoyed at the opportunity to join that great cloud of witnesses in professing our faith.