

“I believe in God, the Father almighty”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

(Part 1) Introduction: Background of the Apostles’ Creed

Most Sundays during the Service of Holy Communion, and as well as in the Service of the Word during the week, we confess the faith of the Christian church in the words of the Apostles’ Creed. This creed is used for the profession of faith in the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and again in the Affirmation of Baptism. Though the Apostles’ Creed developed out of the life and faith of the Western church and was not part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, today this creed is used in many ecumenical settings of the global church. The Apostles’ Creed clearly holds a central place in the life of the church, and yet how often do we think about its history as well as how confessing this creed shapes us over a lifetime? This week we begin a three-week mini-series about the Apostles’ Creed, taking time to consider its history and content, as well as the role of the confession of faith in the ongoing formation of our identity as Christians.

The history of the Apostles’ Creed is complex and the subject of much ongoing scholarly study. I have included some resources for further reading at the end of this week’s mediation, so our survey here will be brief. The Apostles’ Creed developed out of the late second century baptismal creed used in the early church in Rome, a creed known as the “Old Roman Creed.” This creed, originally written in Greek and translated into Latin, predated the Nicene Creed (325), and first appears in an interrogatory form in the *Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 235). There the priest asked the baptismal candidate, “Do you believe in God the Father almighty?” To which the candidate responded in Latin, “*Credo*” (“I believe”).

So from a very early stage in the development of the church, this ancient creed was used for the confession of faith and entrance into membership in the church through baptism. Its ongoing significance for us is that we still use this ancient interrogatory form of the Apostles’ Creed in Holy Baptism (see ELW p. 229) when the pastor asks baptismal candidates, as well as parents and sponsors, “Do you believe in God the Father?” inviting the response, “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Seen in this way, the Apostles’ Creed provides continuity, connecting us in the present to the apostolic faith of the ancient church. Such a realization should cause us to ask, “How did this creed develop, and what has been its role in the church?”

The name, “Apostles’ Creed” (*symbolum apostolorum* in Latin), first appeared in a letter sent by the Synod of Milan (390), written by St. Ambrose to Pope Siricius, and its very name witnesses to the existence of the legend that the apostles shared the actual authorship of the creed. A recounting of the legend that the apostles each contributed to the creed was first cited by Rufinus of Aquileia in his *Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed* (c. 400). Though the twelve apostles did not actually write

the creed, the legend nevertheless contains a germ of truth in that the content of the creed *is the apostolic faith* of early church *as transmitted* by the apostles.

The first known appearance of the Latin text of the creed's final form, as we know it today, was in a handbook of Christian doctrine written in c. 710-724 by St. Priminus, who was the first abbot of the monastery of Richenau near Lake Constance. Priminus included both positive statement and interrogatory forms of the creed, witnessing to it as both a rule of faith as well as the creed by which the church baptizes. The question, then, is how did the Old Roman Creed undergo transformation into its final form as the Apostles' Creed, as contained in the handbook compiled by St. Priminus? The answer, in part, is that the Old Roman Creed was not further developed in Rome, but rather it developed through its use in the local church, primarily in southwest France in the churches in South Gaul and Provence, at a time when the church in Western Europe was also being challenged by the persistence of Arianism.

Historically, however, it was the Frankish rulers, and Charlemagne in particular, who deliberately made liturgical uniformity a priority over regional difference, and in doing so made the Apostles' Creed the sole baptismal creed of the Western Church. The Frankish rulers laid great stress on the learning of the creed and the Lord's Prayer for all Christians. In 742 Carloman sanctioned the decisions of the *Concilium Germanicum*, presided over by St. Boniface, in which every year during Lent, bishops were to examine their parish clergy chiefly on the rites of baptism, on the prayers and ritual of the mass, and on the Catholic faith, to establish whether or not clergy grasped the essentials of Christian teaching. The Apostles' Creed functioned as the uniform shape and content of the confession of the essentials of the faith. The ordinances of the above council were also accepted by Pepin in 744 at the Council of Soissons, and eventually promulgated by his son, Charlemagne in 769 for all regions under his reign. Further in 811-813, Charlemagne wrote to all the bishops of his realm demanding detailed information about the baptismal rites and the baptismal creed used in their dioceses. Thus, through intentional effort over a sustained period of time, the path of the final form of the Apostles' Creed attested to in the 8th century handbook of St. Priminus begins to emerge. What is remarkable is that by the 9th century the present form of the Apostles' Creed had appeared in nearly all psalters in use in Western Europe.

We may briefly summarize that the present form of the Apostles' Creed developed out of the Old Roman Creed through its use in the catechetical and sacramental life of the early medieval church outside of Rome. Its uniform spread across Western Europe was due to the intentional regulatory efforts of the early Carolingian Empire. Thus, the Apostles' Creed, enriched and improved, eventually made its way back to Rome, to the place of its initial formation, as the summation of the apostolic faith of the Christian church. Because it had been both part of the catechetical and worship life of the church, as well as the unification of Western Europe, the Apostles' Creed became normative in the public teaching and worship life of the church.

(Part 2) Article One of the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

The first article of the Old Roman Creed read simply, *"I believe in God, the Father almighty."* The phrase *"in God, the Father almighty"* is an English translation of the creed from Latin and Greek manuscripts (*in Deum patrem omnipotentem* and εἰς θεὸν πατέρα παντοκράτορα). Regarding this, St. Augustine wrote "Observe how quickly the words are spoken, and how full of significance they are. He is God, and he is Father: God in power, Father in goodness. How blessed we are to find that our Lord God is our Father!" (Sermon 213). These words remind us that in confessing our faith in the Father, we are also grasping our identity as children of God the Father in baptism. As God the Father said to Jesus at his baptism, *"You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:11), so too, in confessing the creed we are expressing our joy at being children of the Father. The words of the first article of the creed also give depth and perspective to the words of the Lord's Prayer, *"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name."* In this way we see our prayer life is inseparably linked to our baptism into the triune name into which we have been baptized.

In the Old Roman Creed the underlying meaning of the original Greek word translated into English as "almighty," was not identical with this English word. Rather, the meaning taken for granted in the second century church was wider in meaning than simply "almighty," and included "all-ruling" and "all-sovereign." Early church writers support this by saying that for God the Father to be "almighty" means that the Father rules and encompasses all things, and creates all things. Augustine argued in reverse fashion writing, "I can tell you the sort of things He could not do. He cannot die, He cannot sin, He cannot lie, He cannot be deceived. Such things He cannot: if He could, He would not be almighty" (Sermon 213). For early Christians everything about the first article centers on the Father by whose creative Fatherhood Jesus was born of Mary and at his baptism was called *"my Son, the Beloved."* The creative Fatherhood of God is seen in the God who cannot die, allowing his Son to suffer, die and be raised as servant and Savior, giving hope of all people.

Martin Luther bears no small amount of responsibility for elevating the Apostles' Creed in Protestant churches during the Reformation era through of his championing of it in the *Small and Large Catechism*. Those who have been confirmed in the Lutheran church will have read Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, but fewer will have read Luther's commentary on the Apostles' Creed in the *Large Catechism*. In the *Large Catechism*, Luther emphasized the words "creator of heaven and earth," to mean not only the cosmos, created order, and all that has life, but also to mean that God has created "all physical and temporal blessings – good government, peace and security." Luther goes on, "Thus we learn from this article that none of us has life – or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned – from ourselves, nor can we by ourselves preserve any of them, however small and unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word *Creator*."

For Luther the confession of God the Father as "almighty" and as "Creator" was something that should bring love, praise and thanksgiving, through a life of devotion and service. Luther, however,

also wrote of humanity's self-centeredness in relation to God the Father,

Here much could be said if we were to describe how few people believe this article. We all pass over it; we hear it and recite it, but we neither see nor think about what the words command us to do. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast and brag as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its own blindness, misusing the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator" (*The Book of Concord*. Edited by Kolb and Wengert, Fortress Press, 2000).

Luther's words, though strong, continue to ring true. Human nature hasn't changed very much. Luther wrote, though human beings sin daily, Christians have an advantage in that they know they are to love, serve and obey God in all things. Luther is laying bare a truth about the confession of our faith. Our confession of faith fosters and strengthens Christian self-identity, as well as giving birth to a sense of personhood as a beloved child of God the Father. The word *credo*, "I believe" is a personal identification with the one confessed. When we say, "I love you," we say something about ourselves and about the one who is loved. In saying, "I believe," we also say something deeply profound, inseparably joining ourselves by faith to the Triune God.

In volume one of *The Christian Tradition*, Jaroslav Pelikan famously defined Christian doctrine as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches and confesses on the basis of the word of God." As we have seen in this week's brief survey, the Apostles' Creed developed from the ancient Roman church's confession of what it believed about the Triune God based upon the apostolic teaching of Jesus' disciples. The church continues to believe, teach and confess this faith because over time it has proved enduring not only for the church, but in providing individual human beings with self-identity and purpose as beloved children who serve God and neighbor. Over a lifetime, the confession of faith not only become ours, but in the context of baptism, forever joins us to Christ and the apostles who witnessed to him. Amen.

For further reading in this series:

Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Creeds*. (Third edition), Essex: Longman, 1972.

Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines*. (Revised edition), San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978.

Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition, vol. 1, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Next week: We will explore more about the connection between "believing" and "confessing," between creeds and confessions, as we think about what it means to simultaneously believe as individuals, as well as to confess as the body of Christ, the church.