

*“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord”*

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

(Part 1) Creeds and Confessions

As Paul suggests in Galatians 5:6, Christianity is about “faith active in love.” When Christ commands his followers “to love one another,” he is asking them to put the content of their faith in him into action through love toward their neighbor. Christians confess the content of their faith through loving action in the world.

This week, as we continue to think about the *Apostles’ Creed*, we begin by thinking about the language of faith. In English, the words “to believe” and “belief” are cognates, a verb and a noun with the same stem and meaning. However, today, the noun “belief” as used to refer to “the Christian faith” is considered archaic and obsolete in many dictionaries. Though this meaning of “belief” lingers in common usage, we usually speak and write of “the Christian faith” rather than “the Christian belief.”

This highlights the asymmetrical relationship between the verb “to believe” and the noun “faith.” This is in contrast to New Testament words expressing trust in God, “to believe” (*pisteuein*) and “faith” (*pistis*), which share the same Greek root. In other words, in the New Testament, one root word for “faith,” a noun and a verb, both share the same meaning. This allows for an easy understanding that the noun “faith,” is actually also an activity expressed in the verb, “to believe.”

While all of this may seem like semantics, it is important to realize that as Christians, we have a tendency to compartmentalize “faith” as a separate intellectual aspect of the Christian life dividing it from a natural living out of that faith as expressed in the word “to believe.” Said more simply, following Christ is about moving seamlessly from reciting a creed and its intellectual concepts to living out this faith daily through loving words and deeds. Saying “I believe” expresses the entirety of the life of faith; it expresses what we believe in our hearts and the faith we act upon in our lives.

The heritage of the Reformation, in part, is the many written confessions that reformers and denominational church bodies issued to clearly state and clarify the content of their faith. These documents are, almost without fail, called “confessions,” “articles of faith,” and “affirmations of faith,” and usually never called “creeds.” The term “creed” is reserved for statements summarizing the main points of the Christian faith common to, and confessed by, all Christians. “Confessions,” however, refer to historical statements of faith; for example, the *Augsburg Confession* (Lutheran, 1530), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Presbyterian/Reformed, 1646); and “articles” such as the *Smalcald Articles* (Lutheran, 1537), and the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (Church of England, 1571), whereby denominations have sought to give voice to their understanding of the Christian faith and of what it means to live as a Christian confessing this faith in dialogue with the world.

This distinction between creed and confession is helpful because creeds are generally ecumenical statements of faith in which nearly all Christians find both agreement and unity, while confessions have been the means by which denominations have “confessed” their faith within particular cultural, historical and linguistic contexts, thereby distinguishing themselves, and even separating themselves from other church denominations. It is ironic that Christians have historically found unity in creeds, yet have fostered, at times, the unintended by-product of difference and even division through their confessions.

The first word of the *Apostles’ Creed* is “*Credo*,” “I believe.” This simple word points to individual people who are unified in their confession of a common ecumenical creed. The words “I believe” already point to and suggest the corporate unity that individuals have in Christ, who draws human beings out of separation and difference from one another, and into a new and common human community with a mutual mission and ministry toward the world.

Yet we might fairly ask, “Yes, but the first followers of Jesus didn’t recite creeds, so why do we need them?” and “If the center of the Christian faith is about following Jesus, isn’t that enough?” These are fair questions. However, we need to remember Jesus’ disciples didn’t always get it right even when they had Jesus standing in front of them. Whenever they stopped looking at or following Jesus, they misunderstood him or even denied him. Jesus’ call to discipleship is a daily call that needs daily tending and daily self-denial in order that we might hear Jesus’ voice anew and follow him again. The creeds and their denominational counterparts – confessions – give us a framework and a discipline for growth in the content of the Christian faith over a lifetime. The creeds help us hear the salvation story of Jesus, allowing us to give voice to the central message of the Christian faith, the suffering servant, Jesus, who lived, died and was raised so that we might know faith, hope and love through him. In doing so, we too, become part of God’s salvation story.

Confessing the faith in the creeds helps us understand the world and ourselves. In this regard, I have found that two phrases very helpful. Augustine wrote, “unless I believe, I will not understand” and Anselm of Canterbury wrote of “faith seeking understanding.” Both of these phrases point to the importance of faith in understanding our own human existence. What we say we believe has a direct correlation upon how we understand ourselves, the God who has created us, and this cosmos. What we say we believe should also have a direct correlation upon how we live out our faith in God’s love toward others. Creeds and confessions are meant to provide a framework for understanding the good news, they are not meant to replace the good news. An early Christian, Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313-86), wrote about creeds in this way,

This synthesis of faith was made...to present one teaching of the faith in its totality, in which what is of greatest importance is gathered together from all the Scriptures. And just as a mustard seed contains a great number of branches in its tiny grain, so also this summary of faith brings together in a few words the entire knowledge of the true religion which is contained in the Old and New Testaments.

Over a lifetime of confessing the *Apostles' Creed*, we are encouraged to believe and to understand the content of all of the branches and aspects of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It is only through the dynamic conversation between confessing and living the faith that, over a lifetime, we begin to glimpse the fabric of our own created humanity as a garment we wear throughout our lifetimes, yet which will be perfected and transformed in the resurrection. As Christ shared in our human garment by living, suffering and dying, so too, we are encouraged live out our faith sharing our lives with others.

(Part 2) Article Two of the *Apostles' Creed*:

*"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead."*

When Paul writes in Colossians (1:26), "*the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages has now been made known*," he is pointing to the revelation of the triune God in the person of Christ Jesus. In confessing Article 2 of the creed we are saying something significant about what God has done, is doing, and will do in human history.

As mentioned last week, the *Apostles' Creed* is based upon the "Old Roman Creed" which read very simply, "*and in Christ Jesus his only Son our Lord*." The confession of Jesus as "Son" refers to an eternal relationship of unity with the Father, also referred to at Jesus' baptism as "my beloved Son." However, in these words we also hear an even earlier echo of the confession contained in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "*no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit*." The confession "*Jesus is Lord*" elevates Jesus above every other lord and power in the world. This made confessing Christ a potentially subversive action in the Roman Empire. In a world where confessing "Caesar is Lord" was the norm, confessing "Jesus is Lord" could lead to execution, as it did in the case of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in 155, shortly before this creed was written. What is suggested here is the power to confess Jesus Christ as Lord is given by the gift of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us in our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

After this confession of Jesus Christ as Son and Lord, the words beginning "*born of the virgin Mary*" through "*he ascended into heaven*," reveals the faith of the early church, which recognized the need to anchor any confession about Jesus in human history. All of the gospels and other New Testament writings intentionally witness to Jesus as a human being who was born, lived, suffered, died and was buried – as one who shared a life common to all human beings. This insistence on Jesus' humanity was meant to fight early heresies that distorted Jesus' identity, cleaving his divinity from his humanity.

The heresy called "Docetism," for example, argued that the earthly Jesus only "seemed" to suffer and die, that his humanity was only apparent rather than real – meaning at the cross, Jesus' Spirit

escaped before death. Rather, the creed lays emphasis on Jesus' humanity as a core message of the gospel in which Jesus is our brother and friend as well as our Redeemer.

This instinct of the Early Church, to confess the historicity of Jesus, is also seen in the insertion of the reference to Pontius Pilate, thereby rooting the messianic event in human history, in the history of the Roman Empire. The phrase "*he descended to the dead*," unique to the *Apostles' Creed* is enigmatic, yet often thought to be a reference to 1 Peter 3:19, in the context of Jesus' death "*in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison*," whereby the gospel message that the nearness of the kingdom of God extends to the dead and to those who have died without having had the chance to hear this message.

The ascent into heaven, the placement of Jesus at the Father's right hand, and Jesus' future coming to judge human history might seem fairly straightforward at first glance, but also expresses the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century faith of early Christians that Jesus Christ has defeated the hostile powers of the world that opposed him, his reign, and his church. Confessing Jesus as judge is as counter-cultural today as it was then. Seen in this way, the words of the creed are revolutionary, incendiary even, because they place faith in Jesus and his coming kingdom in direct conflict with the powers of this world. Such confession encourages Christians to see that their lives are important in Jesus' mission and ministry in this world.

Confessing our faith through the creeds is a living reminder that as we follow Jesus, we also walk in the same footsteps of faith as the saints who have walked before us. John of Salisbury (1120-80) described this in the following way:

We are sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they were, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.

In saying "I believe," and confessing our faith in words so many before us have confessed, we are raised up in stature through believing in an apostolic faith that builds us into one body, the church, greater and larger than our individual selves. Over a lifetime, saying "I believe" unifies individuals to speak and act with unity and courage as the church about a message of love that continues to be counter-cultural, transforming the culture of the world into the kingdom of God.

For further reading in this series:

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

McGrath, Alister, *Faith and the Creeds*. London: SPCK, 2013.

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.

Next week: We will look at Article 3 of the *Apostles' Creed*, and explore what confession about the Spirit means for our development as human beings over a lifetime.