

“I believe in the Holy Spirit”

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

(Part 1) Confessing the Faith and Christian Identity

We say many things about ourselves in a variety of places: home, work, community, and church. What we say about ourselves and how we live out this “self-confession” is a crucial component of self-identity. However, does this confession about ourselves always mesh with our actions? Self-identity and its meaning emerge and develop over time from what human beings confess about themselves in word and deed to the world. This is certainly true about the Christian faith. Christians have historically, through the rites of the church, made the public confession of sins and the confession of faith integral to their identity as Christians. The liturgy of the church, what Christians believe and confess on the basis of the word of God, shapes Christian identity over a lifetime. The proclamation of God’s grace in forgiveness and in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper are meant to send Christians out into the world daily to embody “faith active in love” (Gal. 5:6). What we confess about ourselves in church should inform how we live each day.

The early church theologian Tertullian wrote that the confession of sins was a “*publicatio sui*,” or a “publishing of oneself” before God and others as a repentant sinner in need of grace and forgiveness. I would like to suggest that Tertullian’s description of confession, as “self-publication,” is as alive today as when he wrote in 2nd century North Africa. The explosion of social media platforms over the past twenty years, has shown that human beings today self-publish all kinds of statements about themselves attempting to demonstrate to others who they are, and to whom, what, or which faction, they belong or aspire to. Self-publication, or the ways we “confess” who we are via social media, has now become so common that someone who is “off the grid” is actually the true revolutionary.

Today, amidst divergent self-confessions, public manifestos, and divisive rhetoric, what meaning does confessing the Christian creeds still have in the formation of Christian identity and the living out of one’s faith? Can the public confession of faith still guide individuals and the church to a sense of identity and purpose in the midst of the world and its competing voices and agendas? Luke Timothy Johnson argues that public confession of the creeds is a counter-cultural act with meaning in today’s world.

In a world that celebrates individuality, [Christians] are actually doing something together. In an age that avoids commitment, they pledge themselves to a set of convictions and thereby to each other. In a culture that rewards novelty and creativity, they use words written by others

long ago. In a society where accepted wisdom changes by the minute, they claim that some truths are so critical that they must be repeated over and over again. In a throwaway, consumerist world, they accept, preserve, and continue tradition. Reciting the creed at worship is thus a counter-cultural act (*The Creed*, pp. 40-41).

In confessing the creeds, Christians say that the biblical story expressed by the creeds “tells the world a truth about itself that the world does not know” (*ibid*, p. 304). The Trinitarian shape of the creeds states an essential truth about creation and the natural world, human identity and community, and the goal and end of all history. Confessing the creeds is not simply intellectual assent to abstract truths; rather, it is nothing less than surrender and abandonment of the self into the love of the triune God and discipleship to Jesus. Repeated over a lifetime, the confession of faith reminds us that we are not as self-made as the world tells us; the creeds remind us that God has created us for community and loving service with and for others. In confessing our faith we lift our eyes and hopes upward toward the ground and goal of all life, so that following Jesus Christ in lives of loving service, we journey toward the consummation of “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” Because love is God’s self-revelation, love alone is believable, and love therefore, becomes the tangible shape of confessing the faith over a lifetime.

The Apostles’ Creed represents the core of the Christian faith, which developed out of the sacramental worship life of early Christians. The creed recounts the drama of salvation, and in our confession of it, we become part of God’s unfolding salvation story. The creed invites us into the “big picture” we could not know or conceive without God’s loving self-revelation. Regarding this, Alister McGrath writes, “It is about entering into and acting in accordance with this bigger picture, aligning ourselves with its vision of reality” (*Faith and the Creeds*, p. 103). Confessing the creed ensures that we also struggle with this story over a lifetime, allowing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to shape our life and work as human beings.

Christians hope for a future they cannot see, yet through grace and faith, believe in. The creeds, with brief and well-crafted clarity, keep us honest about the mystery of both ourselves and God, teaching us that we come to know the mystery of life by participation in the creative and life-giving grace that exists between confessing and living out the Christian faith.

(Part 2) Article Three of the Apostles’ Creed:

“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.”

In Article 3 of the creed we confess our faith in the Holy Spirit, and what this means for us both over a lifetime, and for a future we hope in, yet cannot fully grasp or see. These six brief statements

about life in the Spirit say something profound about the shape of God's plan for human community lived in this world, and promised in the consummation of life eternal.

From its very beginning, the church has believed in God, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is *pneuma* or *ruach*, meaning wind and breath; it is God's breath in the creation of human beings (Gen. 2:7); it is Jesus' description, "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth*" (Jn. 4:24); it is the Spirit which the risen Jesus breathed upon his disciples as a promise of new life in the Spirit (Jn. 20:22); it is the Holy Spirit filling the church at Pentecost (Acts 2). By stating our belief in the Holy Spirit, we open ourselves to participating in the loving union of the Father and the Son, proceeding outward from them in the Spirit toward the world.

The late Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that when we confess our faith in the Holy Spirit, "the acknowledgement of the Father, Son, and Spirit is finished. What follows is acknowledgement, in belief, of the redemptive work of the three divine Persons" (*Credo*, p. 77). In the creed, our confession about the church, its community, forgiveness, and the hope of resurrection and life eternal, are the descriptions of the redemptive life that all Christians share in the Spirit.

The "catholic" church means it is "universal," that it is the "*ecclesia*" or "gathering" of the Spirit, which is both global and eternal. The church is gathered solely by the power of the Spirit, and the eternal church endures, even in persecution, as it suffers for Christ and the world. In "the communion of the saints," Balthasar writes, "we have a glimpse into the unfathomable Mystery that, because Jesus 'died for all,' no one may any longer live and die for self alone (2 Cor. 5:14f.); but that, in loving selflessness, as much of the good as anyone possesses belongs to all..." (*Credo*, p. 79). Thus, the church is a model of what true human community is to be: life lived not only for individuals but also for others, suffering with and for one's neighbors.

The "forgiveness of sins" is the work of the triune God. From his cross, Jesus asked the Father for forgiveness, saying "Father forgive them." Forgiveness flows from the unity of the Father and the Son into the human heart offering assurance and release, as well as the compassion, courage, and strength to forgive others.

As the risen Jesus returned to forgive Peter, who had denied him, Jesus gave Peter new work and a new identity in his command that Peter tend and care for others. We are forgiven so that we know how to forgive; and it is only through forgiveness, as reconciled people in Holy Baptism, that we become members of Christ's body the church. We are made strong so that we might help the weak (Rom 15:1). Reconciled, we no longer live apart from one another, but are called into Christ's body, the church, to bear one another in service and love.

"*The resurrection of the body*" is a future hope, and also a present reality. The Easter stories of Jesus emphasize his resurrection, not as a disembodied "spirit," but as a bodily person who lives

anew in the Spirit. The Christian hope of the resurrection is one that we do not yet have adequate experience to fully express, like Paul (1 Cor. 15:35ff), we stammer in images and symbols, grasping at a reality that we have only glimpsed in faith. The Eucharist provides the surest symbol of the resurrected body of Christ Jesus present in the bread and wine, a sure hope and consolation that our earthly suffering is healed and transformed by the presence of the Lord who comes to us in his Holy Supper. In this way, we participate in the forgiving resurrection grace of Christ Jesus who gathers us into the communion of saints. In the Eucharist, we glimpse our hope of God's final transformation of a "new heaven and the new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

Balthasar expresses our faith when he writes, "We believe in the life everlasting without being able to foresee what it will be" (*Credo*, p. 95). Our hope is based upon the promise of Christ to Martha, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (Jn. 11:25-26). Paul also expressed the Christian hope when he wrote, "that I may know the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10-11). The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are the central and final hope of the Christian faith.

In Latin, the Apostles' Creed is called the *Symbolum apostolorum*, and this is why creeds are often called "symbols" of the faith. Indeed, our confession of faith is not simply something we read during worship, or a tradition that has little to do with contemporary life. Rather, our *living confession* of the creed is of "faith active in love," of lives lived as symbols of God's grace and love. Looking back upon our brief lives, it is our eternal hope that our words and deeds have been living symbols pointing others toward the promises of Christ that we have spent a lifetime trusting, struggling with, and hoping in. In a world continuously publishing about itself with shifting and changing voice, may our lives, like the hymn "O Zion Haste," have been faithful symbols, joyfully publishing "tidings of Jesus, redemption and release." Amen.

For further reading in this series:

Balthasar, Hans Urs von, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed*. Translated by David Kipp.

San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*. New York:

Doubleday, 2003.

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.