

Gen. 1:1-7

April 23, 2023

Jude 3-4, 20-25

This We Believe ... The Apostles' Creed - Part 1

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

I. Why We Have Creeds

A Peanuts cartoon pictured Lucy and Linus looking out the window at a steady downpour. "Boy," said Lucy, "look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?"

"It will never do that," Linus replied confidently. "In the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow."

"You've taken a great load off my mind," said Lucy with a relieved smile.

"Sound theology," replied Linus in a learned ecclesiastical tone, "has a way of doing that."ⁱ

Sound theology, what the church calls its official teachings, is a comfort to the church, not because it is comfortable in the sense of easy, but because here the truths of faith are refined and defined with clarity. The Christian faith is not something we make up as we go along but a treasure received from the early church, which spent enormous intellectual and moral energy organizing and articulating the revelation given by God. The Church is a cracked vessel, to be sure, yet it carries the treasure of God's self-revelation and displays it to the world.

When asked what does your church believe, we can say, "We believe in one God." Great, but what does that mean? You can't read them the entire Bible, so you must summarize and select the most important truths to knowing God and essential to the life of believers. That's what the creed is for.

C. S. Lewis tells of an Air Force officer saying he felt God in the vastness of the desert, but thought the creeds were useless. Yes, but a walk on the beach is not the same as a map of the ocean; and the map is essential to get anywhere.

The Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses that come to our doors hold to doctrines quite different from Christianity. Likewise with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews. In our communities are people who know little or nothing about our faith. Sometimes circumstances demand we explain ourselves to friends and foe alike.

It is important to know what we believe, for what we believe guides how we live. "Religious ideas do not just deal with views about the future of souls, they also deal with how we view our fellow man. And how we view our fellow man determines how we treat him and how we order ourselves within society."ⁱⁱ

What happens to society when it is guided by this or that religion, or no religion? Is there such a thing as no religion? What happens when the majority thinks that God is merely a figment of our imagination, designed to assuage our fear of death? What will secure liberty, dignity, human rights, and charity for individuals if people believe that we are merely chance products of biological change? What kind of society is formed if people believe that purity of thought is a higher value than human rights? What is left to protect the most vulnerable among us when a society subscribes to an ethic that measures human worth in terms of how much it can produce? These are the questions

we should be asking as we wisely measure our basic Christian beliefs against the beliefs behind the various movements in our society: the sex and gender groupings, racial division, climate alarms, abortion and euthanasia, the DEI and such being pushed through institutions. What beliefs undergird these movements? What is their outcome? How do they align or contend with our Christian faith?

Everyone has a way of looking at the world, but not all ways are equally virtuous or healthy. Neither are all ways of looking at the world equally true. The witness of Christians through the centuries is that the most virtuous and truest way of looking at the world is through the lens of our creedal faith. Foremost among the Christian creeds is the Apostles' Creed.

In our hymnal you will find in the back #881: The Apostles' Creed, a statement of core beliefs of Christians going back almost 2,000 years. [It's been in the Methodist hymnal since the middle of the 19th century.] The Apostle's Creed actually developed as a series of questions or teachings for instructing new members in the basic beliefs of Christianity ("The Apostolic Tradition," "Didache," "Symbolum Apostolorum" that Dr. McDonald talked about in his classes).

From the beginning, converts were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and at each stage in the ceremony they answered formal questions about Christian belief. That's how we do it here when we baptize someone. God is affirmed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity – a belief that sets Christians apart from other monotheistic religions. [Note historical statements: Pontius Pilate, crucified, died and buried, resurrection. These things are not myth, they really did happen.]

II. One God

The Apostles Creed begins: *I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.* The foundation is the God of the Bible. Post-modern people ask how can anyone be sure that God exists? We can't see God or touch Him, so is He real? Microwaves cannot be seen, but they cook our food. Television and radio waves cannot be perceived without specialized equipment. How about love? Love is impossible to touch, taste, see, smell, or hear – but would anyone deny that love exists or is necessary to human survival? Unlike mathematical proofs, nothing in the realm of experience can be proven “beyond a shadow of a doubt.” But we can seek “reasonable certainty” which is beyond a “reasonable doubt.” So it is with God. We cannot prove God's existence beyond all possible doubt. But we can look at the “preponderance of the evidence” and come to a reasonable certainty about God.

Reasons to Believe in God

1. Something not nothing. We are alive, there is a universe all around us. There must be a cause for it all. God is not the effect of what we see and experience. Matter is not eternal but is changeable and can be destroyed. But how or who brought it all into being? It must be that God is eternal and cannot be destroyed. ... *ever since the creation of the world, His invisible nature, namely His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, Romans 1:20*

What is the probability that random chance would result in a universe with stars and planets and life? Astronomer Lee Smolin estimates the probability at one chance in ten to 229th power.ⁱⁱⁱ Physicist Stephen Hawking: "If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million-million, the universe would have re-collapsed before it even reached its present size."^{iv} And yet we are here. Who is responsible for this?

2. **Complexity.** The complex nature of life and the universe implies that there must be a designer behind the structure; an intelligent designer. If you have a watch, there has to be a watch maker. The ancient Israelites knew this: *... the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows His handwork, Psalm 19:1.*

Astronomers and physicists are recognizing that chance cannot explain the complexity, creativity, and beauty of the universe and life. The laws of nature seem to be rigged in favor of complexity, in favor of life, and in favor of mind. Mind is written into the laws of nature in a fundamental way.^v

3. **Morality.** All people seem to have a conscience and a sense of right and wrong. The standard may vary from culture to culture, but there is enough that transcends cultures to imply a moral creator, who implanted his standard in humans. "If no set of moral ideas were better than another, there would be no sense in preferring civilized morality to Nazi morality. The moment you say one lot of morals is better than another, you are in fact measuring them by an ultimate standard" said C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.

[For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse, Rom. 1:19-20].

...when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law...they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness... Romans 2:14-15.

4. **Experience.** Many, many intelligent, educated, reasonable people believe in God, and claim He answers their prayers, guides them, and comforts them in times of need. They claim He has changed their lives, given them hope, made a difference in their values, and radically altered their behavior toward fellow human beings. They know this truth: *... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Cor. 5:17.*

III. What Is God Like?

If God exists, what is this God like? That's a vital question. Who is God? What is His essence, His character? How we know who God is, what God is like, is through His self-revelation to us. That's what's recorded in Scripture. In the Bible we discover the many attributes of God. The Apostles Creed summarizes two.

A. We believe in God, the Father almighty... The Scriptures clearly proclaim that both male and female are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and that all men and women are called to equal discipleship in the service of their risen Lord. But God is neither male nor female. Sexuality is a

structure of creation, and since God is Creator, He is above sexuality. God is known to us as Father because that is how He chose to reveal himself. God is not just any god, capable of being named according to human fancy. No, God is the Father of Jesus Christ.

Father is a very personal term. Why so personal when God transcends all human personality? The answer comes from God himself. The God of the Bible meets us Person to person and asks from us the total commitment of our personalities: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*, Deut. 6:5. God asks of us primarily love in return for His love. *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*, Hos. 11:1. And again, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*, John 3:16.

Jesus addressed God as his Father and He taught His disciples to pray to God as “Abba,” a term akin to “Dad” or “Daddy.” The point is, the God we know loves us like a good father, the ultimate father, He is the Father; and God wants a relationship with us. This doesn’t mean God will take away all our struggles and tragedies, but it does mean that we have someone to trust through it all. The Bible is filled with stories of people who had great struggles in life, even failures. Yet as they trusted in God they moved from failure to faithfulness. God brought them through, filling their lives with meaning and purpose. That’s what is in store for each one of us with God our Father.

Now some people ask if God is the Almighty why doesn’t He stop the evil that happens in the world? The answer is that He gave His creation freedom and having freedom is part of sharing the image of God. Freedom means we are free to do good or to do evil. Humans can be saints only in a world where they can also be devils. God despises evil but values freedom. God allows humans to be human, yet seeks to draw us to the good and even redeem goodness from human evil. Christians assert that far from being indifferent to evil and suffering, God became man precisely for the purpose of enduring and overcoming it.

B. We believe in God, Creator of heaven and earth. The very first words of the Bible are, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*, Gen. 1:1. We assert that He’s the Creator, the first source, the primary mover, the measure of all things. God transcends history and time. Before time began, He was. And when time ends, He still will be.

The Bible tells how Moses first met God when he came upon a burning bush that was strangely not consumed by fire. He was astounded then to hear God speak to him. *Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”*

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Exodus 3:13-14. God is beyond anything or anyone we know. He just is. There is no one in His class, He stands alone, apart from all of creation because He created it all, that’s the meaning of “holy.” It follows that He is sovereign; in charge of all things at all times and in every situation; the undisputed Boss of the Universe. If God is not sovereign, then He is not God. And if God is not sovereign, then who is? He knows what He is doing, and He is doing it, even if we can’t understand what He’s doing.

IV. Our Creed

The Apostles' Creed is a statement of faith that belongs to the whole church. Even though it begins with "I believe..." it's not an expressly individualistic statement. This creed was developed very early in the church's history as an instructional aid to those new to the Christian faith – that's why we always use it at baptisms and for new members. Each person confesses their personal faith through this Creed. Nevertheless, the Apostle's Creed is not simply an expression of your beliefs, or my faith, or even the beliefs of some ancient men. No, it is a statement of belief that Christians have shared down through the ages, in all places and times, of what it is every Christian believes. Now, this is quite contrary to the post-modernism that is behind many of the societal movements that confront us. The Creed is not a summary of each person's own "truth." Rather, it expresses the Truth revealed by the Creator of the universe and recorded in the Bible. It is not individualistic but it is very personal. We can make it our own, for as we say it aloud together it becomes our reference point and guide for healthy living. In submitting to this great historic Creed, by saying out loud that God is "the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth" and not "the great spirit that permeates the cosmos," we are placing ourselves under an obligation to say to the Father "Thy will be done."^{vi}

The Apostles' Creed is as relevant today as it was at any other time in history. At a time when Christians in the West are hesitant to speak the truth of God in Jesus Christ and struggle to make disciples, while Christians in other parts of the world are under severe persecution, even facing death, the Creed is essential to faith and life. Beliefs have consequences. What we believe determines how we behave, how we relate to one another, how we raise our children, and how we govern ourselves. God, the awesome and mighty Creator of all that is, yet also personal and approachable, has created humans in His image, endowing each with dignity and worth. The human rights that flow from this understanding actually flow from God, not from governments or other humans. Beliefs matter.

Of course, Christians have come to understand God, Creator and Sovereign of the universe through the lens of Jesus Christ. He is the clearest revelation of God. Jesus said: *Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*, John 14:9. Next week we'll spend some time looking at who Jesus is and how and why He was and is God's only Son and the very embodiment of God.

The Apostles' Creed expresses the core of our faith in God, the truth. When we say it and internalize it, it shapes the way we view everything. *Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God, Psalm 90:1-2.*

ⁱMichael Green, editor, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 113.

ⁱⁱKen Conner, *The Future of Freedom Hinges on Faith*, 5/20/2015, Townhall.com

ⁱⁱⁱDinesh DeSouza, *What's So Great About Christianity*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 130.

^{iv}Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (NY: Bantam Books, 1996), 126; as quoted in DeSouza, 130.

^vDinesh DeSouza, *What's So Great About Christianity*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 131.

^{vi}David Mills "The Flatlanders' Creed" *Touchstone*, March 2000, 17.