

The Apostles' Creed¹

Although not written by the apostles, the Apostles' Creed is a concise summary of their teachings. It originated as a baptismal confession, probably in the second century, and developed into its present form by the sixth or seventh century.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated 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 Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

1. This version of the Apostles' Creed, with the accompanying introductory statement, is taken from *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 1990), 845.



Who Needs a Creed?

When I was at primary school in the British state school system many years ago, it was still the norm not only to teach pupils the Apostles' Creed, but also to have them recite it in class. Looking back on that experience brings many thoughts to mind.

On the one hand, it is almost incredible to think that a state education system could require all pupils to learn such an overtly Christian statement of faith by heart. Such a thing would be inconceivable today—as much because it meant learning something by heart (or “by rote,” as opponents of the practice like to say) as for the fact that it happened to be Christian. But on the other hand, the act of standing and reciting the creed had something of the feel that the daily act of pledging allegiance to the flag must have for many American school children. The words rolled off our tongues, but we had little or no understanding of their meaning or true appreciation of their significance. My guess is that the same is true for many churches where the practice of reciting the creed is still in vogue today. That raises the question, “Who needs a creed?”

The answer to that question from many in the broad sweep of Christendom would probably be, “Not us!” Such ancient

documents are seen at best as outdated and at worst as irrelevant in an age that is more interested in the present than the past, and in which the very idea of beliefs that are fixed is tantamount to sacrilege. That may be the majority view—in a *de facto*, if not conscious sense—but that does not mean it is right. The church is always confessing its beliefs whether it realizes that to be the case or not; the issue is whether or not the beliefs we confess reflect those that are authentically Christian. There is a perennial need for such views to be challenged, ultimately for the sake of the gospel.

This point came home to me more than ever in the congregation and community I served on the edge of inner-city London. Within the church there was a wide cross section of people from all sorts of backgrounds. At one end of the spectrum were those who were well grounded in their faith after years of teaching and study. At the other end were those who came to Sunday services and mid-week groups but who had not the faintest clue of what Christianity is all about. And in between was everyone else! On top of that there was the local parish: a diverse community with all shades of religious belief, including no belief at all. People generally were suspicious about church—especially a church that had the word “evangelical” on its sign. So where were we to begin to address such an array of needs? It may come as more than a little surprise to learn that the Apostles’ Creed provided a very useful tool—one that is able to help us understand and spread the gospel in all sorts of life circumstances. Let me suggest a number of ways in which that proves to be the case.

The Creed Helps Us Wrestle with the Challenge of Articulating the Faith

The very notion of “creed” immediately suggests the idea of expressing belief. In the barest sense it is an expression

of truth in abstraction: “This is what Christians believe.” But historically there was more to it than that. The Latin verb *credo*, from which “creed” is derived, carries a more personal and existential connotation. Hence, several major creeds begin with the words “I believe *in*”—in the sense of placing confidence in, or relying on, particular truths. The Apostles’ Creed spells out the truths a person must believe in if he or she is to be a Christian.

The creed’s history says a lot about its purpose. Even though legend had it that the original authors of this statement of faith were the twelve Apostles—each one contributing one of its twelve constituent parts—the reality is that it evolved from a number of earlier statements of faith. The main antecedent was the so-called Old Roman Creed; but that in turn seems to have been an evolution of two other documents: the *Epistula Apostolorum* and what has come to be known as *Der Bazileh* papyrus—probably part of an Egyptian communion liturgy. Each of these in their own historical settings was an attempt to articulate the faith crisply and clearly for seekers and catechumens.

Those who framed these various statements of faith were simply following the pattern found in Scripture itself. From the simplest article of faith found in the Great *Shema*—“Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4)—right through to the *Carmen Christi* of Philippians 2, the Bible offers multiple examples of summaries and confessions of its own teachings. In this the Bible shows us that its teaching has to be systemized if it is to make sense to us.

Church historian Philip Schaff, in his magisterial *The Creeds of Christendom*, quotes Martin Luther commending the Apostles’ Creed by saying, “Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement.” Schaff himself comments, “As the Lord’s Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue the Law of laws, so the Apostles’ Creed is the Creed

of creeds.”¹ The challenge the creed presents to the church in the twenty-first century is to use it as a framework for expressing these time-honored truths that are essential to Christian faith for the world of our day.

The Creed Provides a Tool for Teaching the Faith

It has been said that the Apostles’ Creed was the Alpha course, or Christianity Explored course of its day. That isn’t far from the truth. Successive generations have come up with their own tools for presenting the main teachings of the Bible, but the Apostles’ Creed is the mother of them all. It sets the principle and provides a paradigm for what needs to be taught.

J. I. Packer’s book *I Want to Be a Christian*² is a fairly recent example of how the creed can continue to function as an effective teaching tool in a contemporary church setting. Packer uses the creed as a framework for exploring each tenet of the faith in such a way as to lead young Christians to see the essence of what is meant, while at the same time providing pointers for those who want to dig deeper.

At an even more basic level, the simple practice of memorizing the creed and reciting it publicly still has enormous merit—especially in an age when memorizing anything is deemed passé. In the syllabus of what every child ought to learn by heart, the Apostles’ Creed must take its place as a core component alongside the list of books of the Bible, Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. And if adults haven’t got there yet, it’s never too late to start.

The creed is a wonderfully versatile tool for instruction. It has a use with children, seekers, new converts, and those who realize that no matter how long we may have been in the

1. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993). Schaff’s comment can be found at 1:14. Luther’s quote appears at 1:15n2.

2. J. I. Packer, *I Want to Be a Christian* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1977).

faith, we can always discover new depths even in the most familiar truths.

The Creed Makes Us Focus on the Heart of the Faith

There is always a temptation to get lost in the minutiae of what the Bible teaches—as is seen in all too many of the distractions and controversies of the New Testament church and the church generally throughout its history. Nowhere was this tendency more damaging than in the church at Corinth, and the apostle Paul’s response to such distractedness is timeless. He reminds Corinthians of what he had taught them in the first place: “What I received I passed on to you as of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3)—here are the core teachings that form the bedrock of the Christian Faith.

So as the creed spells out the sum of saving knowledge for the early church, it takes us first and foremost to the God of the Bible in all his uniqueness and glory. His uniqueness lies in the fact that he is Trinity and his greatest glory is seen in the salvation he provides at such extraordinary cost through his own Son. Grasping this is the theological equivalent of finding the “holy grail” of science: the theory of everything (except that theology seeks to express not a theory, but the God-given truth that is the key to everything).

In an age when evangelical Christianity is rapidly losing its way in a maze of “steps to salvation” and myriad books and sermons on the “how to” of the Christian life, the creed brings us back to the heart of both the gospel and the faith: God himself.

The Creed Guards the Gospel against Distortions of the Faith

Historically, creeds have had a double function: to serve as both a fence and a foundation. They serve as the latter

in that they crystallize the essence of all a person needs to know for life and salvation—that inevitably is more than just a “simple gospel.” In that sense creeds provide a foundation for the church, since the church is the community of the redeemed and is built on the teaching “of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). The Apostles’ Creed encapsulates positively what the essence of that teaching is.

The sad reality of course is that the community of the redeemed has been plagued not merely from without, but more often from within by distortions of that teaching. So creeds have been formulated to provide a fence to guard the church against such aberrations. It is noteworthy that the most insidious distortions of the faith that threatened the church in the early centuries of its existence concerned the doctrine of God himself—whether as Trinity, or in the mystery of the incarnation. It is understandable, therefore, that the Apostles’ Creed is particularly concerned to secure that fence, given the era in which it was framed.

It would be nice to think that almost twenty centuries later, the church no longer needs to go over these elementary teachings of the faith again; but it does. Whether through the assault of open theism or well-meaning ignorance, the truths enshrined in the creed still need to be guarded, and the creed itself continues to be a most effective way to do so.

The Creed Shows the Need for Personal Faith

In every generation, perhaps the greatest threat to the church and the teachings on which she stands is that of the slide into nominalism. Paul warns Timothy that the Last Days will be characterized by those (in the church) who have a “form of godliness” but who deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5). He warns against these people in the strongest possible terms.

This is a danger that lurks most subtly in the Reformed community, where we are inclined to lay great store on scholarship and precision. Such an environment can be paradise for the kind of people Paul is warning us about—especially those who delight in controversy. The essence of Christianity that is authentically Reformed is its concern for authentic experience. The experiential Calvinism of the Reformation and Puritan eras was driven by the conviction that all truth leads to godliness. The study of theology can never be merely academic.

The first three words of the Apostles' Creed embed that conviction at the very centre of the truths it goes on to confess. It is only as we declare our belief *in* this God and all that he has done that we can actually know him along with all the benefits he promises in the gospel. There is a piety reflected in the creed that is key to understanding its truths and making them live for the church and all its members: the piety of genuine personal faith.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Many times in Christian history people have used the slogan, “No Creed but the Bible!” At face value this sounds very commendable—not least because all too often the statements of faith produced by churches have either been born out of disagreements, or have caused them. How, then, can we justify documents like the Apostles' Creed?

This opening study will not only provide the opportunity to think about and discuss that question, but will also point to some key passages in the Bible that help to answer the question more directly.

1. How would you respond to someone who used the slogan, “No Creed but the Bible”?

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2. Look up 2 Timothy 1:13–14. Paul has just spoken of his role as a “herald, apostle and teacher” of the gospel (v. 11) and he now describes the essence of what he has taught Timothy as “the pattern of sound teaching.”
 - a. Why does Paul say that his teaching is “sound”? (The word he uses also means “healthy.”)
 - b. Why does he describe it as the “*pattern* of sound teaching”?
 - c. How should this help Christians to be alert to interpretations of the Bible that are unsound?
 - d. Why does this pattern of teaching need to be kept “with faith and love in Christ Jesus”?
 - e. Paul also calls this pattern of teaching “the good deposit”: why does Timothy (and why do Christians through the ages) need the Holy Spirit’s help to guard this deposit?
 - f. In what sense is the Apostles’ Creed a “pattern of sound teaching”?
3. Look up 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul is still talking about the essence of the teaching he has passed on to Timothy but now speaks of how that same teaching is to be passed on through the generations that follow.
 - a. What did it mean for Timothy to “entrust to reliable men” what he had heard Paul teach publicly?
 - b. Why was it important for these men not only to be “reliable” but “qualified to teach others” as well?
 - c. How do summaries of the main elements in the Bible’s teaching like the Apostles’ Creed help us to pass on the heart of the Christian message from generation to generation?
4. In what ways does the creed function as a “fence and a foundation” for the core teachings of the Bible?

Who Needs a Creed?

5. Given that the Bible ranges far and wide in what it says, how does the creed help us to identify and articulate the main components of its message?
6. Why is it important to notice that the creed begins with the words “I believe *in* . . .”?