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The Apostles' Creed

One of the most universally recognized and accepted creeds in church history is no doubt what has come to be known as the Apostles' Creed. For centuries, it has been recited widely, confessed boldly, and believed sincerely. J.I. Packer observes, 'If life is a journey, then the million-word-long Holy Bible is the large-scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-word Apostles' Creed...is the simplified road map.'¹ Additionally, R.C. Sproul notes, 'It boldly declares that there is truth that is foundational to life, a truth that cannot be compromised without the peril of falling into the abyss of meaninglessness.'² But where did it come from? Why is it so popular?

BACKGROUND

The origins of the Apostles' Creed are a bit mysterious. One early tradition, according to an Italian Christian writer named Rufinus, maintains that before the twelve apostles parted ways to carry the gospel to the farthest reaches of the known world, they gathered together and composed a short creed, each

1. J.I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 17.

2. R.C. Sproul, *What We Believe: Understanding and Confessing the Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015), 10.

apostle contributing one line.³ Most scholars regard this story as pure fiction, but it serves as the reason why the statement is called ‘the Apostles’ Creed.’ The general consensus is that the creed was derived from the Old Roman Creed (c. A.D. 140) that was recited during baptisms.⁴ However, the first written reference was made in a letter from Ambrose of Milan to Rome in A.D. 389. It continued to develop until it was formalized and accepted by the Western churches during the reign of Charlemagne sometime around the early ninth century.⁵ Even today, it is recited in virtually every Roman Catholic diocese and Protestant denomination (though more in some denominations than others).

As for the name and content, Francis Turretin muses: ‘The Apostles’ Creed is so called, not efficiently (as delivered by the apostles), but materially (as it was drawn from the doctrines of the apostles and is the marrow and substance of them).’⁶ Or put another way, ‘The Apostles’ Creed is the earliest attempt of the Christian mind to systematize the teachings of the Scripture, and is, consequently, the uninspired foundation upon which the whole after-structure of symbolic literature rests.’⁷ In other words, the creed consists of the basic essentials of the Christian faith. It has been stated many times that, while you can certainly believe and affirm *more* than the Apostles’ Creed, you cannot believe and affirm any *less*. William Perkins has said, it is ‘indeed the very pith and substance of

3. Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 19.

4. Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

5. Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 89.

6. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. George Musgrave Giger, trans., James T. Dennison, Jr., ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:61.

7. William G.T. Shedd cited in Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931, repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), I:16.

Christian religion.⁸ So essential is the content of Apostles' Creed, the theologian Herman Witsius remarked, 'the [person] who wantonly rejects it, ought not to be esteemed a Christian.'⁹ It is nothing short of the expression of core Christianity.

What is contained in the Apostles' Creed? While scholars have produced countless pages of commentary on the content of the creed, the following brief exposition may be helpful to get at the heart of its teaching.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

As mentioned earlier, the creed begins with the statement 'I believe' (Latin: *credo*). The creed's content is not just meant to be understood or affirmed, but conscientiously believed to the core of one's own soul. This is the heart cry of every genuine Christian believer. As to its structure, the creed consists of four main parts: God, Christ, the Spirit, and the Church.

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

The first line of the creed identifies the core of belief in the person of God. This identifies Christianity as a God-focused religion, over and against so many of the self-focused religions of the world. But even more distinct than other religions who claim to worship a god, the creed identifies 'God the Father'—a personal title for God given in the Bible (Deut. 32:6; Matt. 5:48; Eph. 1:3, etc.). Even in Jesus' model prayer, He instructed the disciples to begin by praying 'Our *Father* in heaven, hallowed be your name' (Matt. 6:9, emphasis added). More than just a distant god who keeps himself aloof from his creation, God the Father loves His people and treats us as children.

8. William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*: Volume 5. Ryan Hurd, ed. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 4.

9. Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed* (repr. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), I:14.

The next phrase qualifies ‘God the Father’ in order to give us a greater understanding of His nature and attributes. He is called ‘Almighty’ who is the ‘Maker of heaven and earth.’ This not only speaks to God’s creative abilities to bring forth all of existence besides Himself (‘heaven and earth’ no doubt representing the entire creation), but also the power by which He has created everything. While the creed doesn’t articulate every one of God’s many attributes, the fact that He is ‘Almighty’ is a way to represent them all (cf. 1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 91:1–2; Jer. 32:17; Rom. 1:20, etc.).

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son, our Lord;

At this point in the creed, we are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ. The name ‘Jesus’ refers to Him who was born to Mary in Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago, while ‘Christ’ comes from the Greek word *christos* which translates the Hebrew word rendered *Messiah* (meaning ‘anointed one’). And so, ‘Christ’ is not a name but a title for the long-awaited Savior who had been promised to deliver God’s people.

Following the identification of Jesus Christ, we read that he is called God’s ‘only-begotten Son.’ This designation has been the cause of much controversy and misunderstanding through the years. While the full expression of the doctrine of the Trinity did not come until later years, the church’s belief and apprehension of the deity of Jesus Christ has never been in question. Jesus is God (e.g. John 1:1–3; 20:28; Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; Titus 2:13). However, how do we understand Jesus in relation to God the Father? The Bible refers to Jesus as the *Son* of God—His ‘only-begotten Son’ (John 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). This is not to be understood as Jesus being somehow one son of many, or even that He came into existence at any one point. Rather it utilizes the Hebrew expression ‘son of...’ to refer to the comparative likeness of parents and children.

To be a 'son of' someone is to be regarded as being *just like* them, and to be 'begotten' is to come forth from them.¹⁰ As an expression, Jesus as the 'son of God' is understood to reflect His identification as God (Luke 1:35; cf. Matt. 16:13–17), as well as to His position of preeminence (Heb. 1:5). Added to Jesus' title as God's *Son*, He is also His '*only-begotten*' Son (John 1:18)—there's no one else like Him.

The final title given to Jesus Christ in this line is that of 'Lord.' The word 'Lord' translates the Greek word *kurios* which means 'Master.' While the title was used as a way to address an honored person, the lordship of Christ refers to His absolute sovereignty and dominion over all things. In some cases, it was even used as a title of deity. More specifically, however, Christ here is called '*our* Lord,' referring to all believers who would affirm the truth of the creed. In this way we understand that Jesus is the reigning Lord over the life of every Christian believer, in this age and in the age to come (cf. Acts 2:36; Rom. 10:9; Col. 2:6). To acknowledge Jesus as Lord is to submit oneself to His mastery over every aspect of life and to confess His full deity.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; The Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would come by way of a virgin birth: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isa. 7:14). This was fulfilled at the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary recorded in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels. The reason the virgin birth is significant is because it succeeds in bringing forth a 'second Adam' who came 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rom. 8:3) to redeem what was lost at the fall of the first Adam.

10. An expanded discussion of 'begotten' occurs in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. For the translation of 'only-begotten' being preferred over 'one and only,' see the discussion in Chapter 3.

Yet Jesus was miraculously ‘conceived of the Holy Spirit’ and born to Mary while she was still a virgin. In this way, not only was Jesus’ birth proof of His true and full humanity, but He was born without the stain of original sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:21–22). Furthermore, because Jesus was born without sin, and is Himself God incarnate, His death on the cross would surely be an acceptable sacrifice to God for the payment of sins, as a ‘spotless Lamb’ (Heb. 7:27; 1 Pet. 1:19; cf. John 1:29). Only a sinless sacrifice was able to be offered for the sins of God’s people, and this was accomplished through the virgin birth.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried;

The next few lines are taken nearly verbatim from 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 where Paul notes that ‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.’ This line in the creed makes note of the first two aspects of Paul’s testimony.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ is the single most significant event in human history. All four Gospels recount the details of His suffering, trial, death, burial, and resurrection. The creed makes reference to the fact that Jesus ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate,’ who was the Roman magistrate over Israel at the time. This detail roots the crucifixion of Christ in history thus affirming its authenticity. Under his watch, Jesus was scourged and then crucified by being nailed to a wooden cross (Matt. 27:26–44).

After suffering the agony of the cross, Jesus ‘yielded up his spirit’ and died (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30). Why is it significant that Jesus died? It was the full payment of the sins of all believers (1 John 2:2; 4:10). His final words—‘It is finished’—tell of His full satisfaction of the wrath

of God against sin, as well as the ransom payment made for us (Mark 10:45; Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17).

After His death, the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross, and honorably prepared for burial by his followers (John 19:38–42). At that point, His body was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57–61), as a fulfillment of the prophecy: '[he was] with a rich man in his death' (Isa. 53:9). Often times people will ask why Jesus had to die. His death effectively destroyed the eternal punishment for sin, as we read in Colossians 2:14, that His death 'cancel[ed] the record of debt that stood against us...this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.' Jesus' death ensures that whatever penalty was reserved for us for our sinfulness has been completely and utterly destroyed on the cross, and given a complete burial, never to be revived again.

He descended into hell;

Many believers bristle against the line, 'he descended into hell,' for various reasons. Part of the reason is because the Roman Catholic Church has used it to justify the notion that Christ descended into the depths of hell to fight for the souls of departed saints. This opens the door for the notion of purgatory, which is foreign to Scripture. However, one supposed proof text for this interpretation comes from the highly debated text, 1 Peter 3:18–19, where we read that Christ 'being put to death...he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,' that they might repent of their disobedience to God and be redeemed. Some scholars have argued that the phrase is absent from the early versions of the creed, and therefore conclude that it doesn't belong. Others, however, have been able to identify the clause in early literature, thus strengthening the case for its authenticity. Nevertheless, there is an even greater problem with this interpretation of the creed. The Roman Catholic

interpretation that Christ ministered savingly to persons in hell seems to imply that the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross was somehow insufficient to atone for all believers.

However, the Gospel accounts are clear that, as Jesus prepared to die on the cross, He announced, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). The very next moment, Christ was in heaven with the Father, not in hell with sinners. Furthermore, there is a theological reason why Jesus would not have gone to hell to preach the gospel to the dead. On the cross, Christ paid the debts of sinners in full. As we saw earlier, Jesus's final words recorded in John 19:30 were, 'It is finished!' The original Greek word used in the verse, *tetelestai*, means 'paid in full.' The death of Christ was the full and final payment for *all* sins, for *all* believers, for *all* time.

Many scholars make note of how the early church would have understood Christ's descent into hell. Second-century theologian Tertullian wrote that 'Christ our God, Who because He was man died according to the same Scriptures, satisfied this law also by undergoing the form of human death in the underworld.'¹¹ Chrysostom refers to death as 'the lower parts of the earth.'¹² In other words, 'descended into hell' is another way of referring to death and burial in the ground. Add to that, as Justin Holcomb notes, the Latin translations of the creed have employed the phrases *ad inferna* ('into hell') and *ad infernos* ('to the dead') to refer to Christ's descent.¹³ Most assuredly, the creed is not intending to convey the notion that Christ's death was some mystical, spiritual occurrence, but a literal, bodily death whereby he was buried in a tomb, into 'the lower parts of the earth' where He remained three days until resurrecting.

11. Quoted in Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 28.

12. Quoted in Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Apostles' Creed*, II:139.

13. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 28.

The third day he arose again from the dead;

After being crucified and buried, the Bible tells us that, on the third day, Jesus rose from the grave (e.g. Matt. 16:21; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). In doing so, Jesus proved that He had conquered death once for all. Furthermore, as Mark Jones notes, ‘The resurrection was the Triune God’s ‘Amen’ to all that Christ did on earth as mediator, particularly through his vicarious sin-bearing death on the cross.’¹⁴ Plainly stated, without the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is no salvation and no gospel.

More than a mere affirmation of the satisfaction of the Father’s plan for salvation, Christ’s resurrection also accomplishes work in the lives of believers. First, Christ’s resurrection ensures the regeneration of believers, as 1 Peter 1:3 notes that ‘[God’s] great mercy...has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’ Second, Christ’s resurrection ensures our justification: ‘Jesus our Lord...was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4:25). Third, Christ’s resurrection ensures our future bodily resurrection. The apostle Paul notes, ‘God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power’ (1 Cor. 6:14). Fourth, Christ’s resurrection empowers us to live righteously. ‘For the death [Christ] died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 6:10–11; cf. Rom. 8:11–13). In other words, the resurrection of Jesus Christ brings new life to all those who believe, in this life and in the life to come.

He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

Forty days after Jesus’ resurrection, the Bible teaches that He then ascended bodily up into the clouds (Acts 1:9). Scripture

14. Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 161.