

Confirmation 2020-21 **Session 24 - The Apostle's Creed**

Background Information

When I was a boy, I joined the Boy Scouts of America. The time spent with my friends in my Boy Scout troop were some of the happiest times of my youth. But being a Boy Scout also required work on my part and the parts of many others. It was not enough to attend the meetings and pay my dues (which were just \$.10/week in those days). We had to learn the Scout Oath, Law, Motto, and Slogan. And it was not enough to simply memorize them, a scout had to be able to explain what they meant. And it was not enough to memorize them and explain them, a scout was also expected to live according to its high standard. Though I was not a member of other groups with high definitions and expectations and rules of personal conduct, I am sure there are others.

For Lutheran Christians, "we accept, teach, and confess the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the holy scriptures." (Service of Ordination to Word and Sacrament) For Lutherans, the Apostle's Creed is the litmus test of our Christian faith. It is used prominently in the expression of our faith in weekly worship, in the liturgies of baptism, reception of new members, confirmation, and funerals as well as on other occasions.

Though you probably have never thought about it before, you will not find the Apostle's Creed or any of the other creeds in the Bible. They are not part of the canon of Scripture.

But then, what is the Apostle's Creed and why do we honor it so much? I'm so glad you asked. To answer that question, we need a little context.

What you need to know

The New Testament of the Bible begins with the four Gospels which are narratives of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are followed by Acts, a short name for the activity of the apostles, those disciples of Jesus, both the twelve and others, including the apostle Paul. Acts is followed by the Epistles or Letters of the apostles. And the New Testament is concluded with Revelation. But the one book that you will not find is a book of theology.

Theology comes from the Latin, *theologia*, and means the study of the nature of God and religious belief.

Yes, that's right, among all the subjects covered in the Bible, there is no book of theology. No book defines the Christian faith that Jesus left us only by his teachings and example. And that that has led to denominationalism. All Christian denominations, including Lutherans, think we understand and teach the orthodox Christian faith. But differences, subtle as they may appear to some, have led to wars and even deaths. The fact is, it didn't take long for disagreement to erupt between the Apostles; then between the Apostles and Paul. The Letters of the Apostles contain teachings against issues that existed in the early years of Christendom that crossed the lines of orthodoxy, according to the Apostles. It isn't difficult to understand how these issues could exist. In a day before the Gospels were compiled and distributed, people didn't know what a follower of Christ was or what his example was so that they could follow it. Without the definition we have today, people often pushed the limits of what was acceptable and crossed the lines of orthodoxy. We even have a name for the crossing of the lines of orthodoxy, and that word is *heresy*. One who committed *heresy* was called a *heretic*, and in the early centuries of the Christian era, many heretics were put to death for their heresy.

So way back in 325 CE, Emperor Constantine summoned all the leaders of the Christian faith to Nicea, in present-day Turkey, to reach consensus on the basic tenets of the Christian faith. We even have a name for these basic tenets and that name is *doctrine*. A doctrine is a belief or set of beliefs held and taught by the Church. Before 325 CE, the Christian church had no doctrine so it was difficult to agree on what a Christian was, or even who Jesus Christ was.

Some of the issues that were brought up at the Council of Nicea, as this gathering became known, were the divine nature of Jesus and the calendar scheme for Easter. Have you noticed that western Christians, those of Western Europe, and the Orthodox Church, those of Eastern Europe, don't agree on when Easter is to be celebrated? It's true, but another story for another day. The result of the Council of Nicea, was the Nicene Creed, another creed that we use in worship, but is often seen as secondary to the Apostle's Creed.

The creeds were used by the early Christians in two main ways. First, in a predominantly illiterate society, memorization and recitation of creeds allowed teachings to be fixed in an oral rather than textual way. In preparation for baptism, catechumens, as students of the faith are known, would hear a series of lectures on a creed-like summary of the Christian faith and would then be required to recite the

creed during the ceremony. Therefore, the Apostle's Creed became associated with baptism. Our catechetical instruction that we are going through right now is based on Martin Luther's Small Catechism and we use this period of teaching to "confirm" the faith that your parents and sponsors promised to pass on to you at baptism. Their faith was expressed by the recitation of the Apostle's Creed. When you claim the faith as your own at the liturgy of Confirmation, you will "confirm" you have the faith with the recitation of the Apostle's Creed also.

In the second place, creeds were used to identify and interpret Scripture in the context of false teachers and false scriptures. We stand on the other side of a defined canon of Scripture, which occurred at the end of the fourth century, and two-thousand years of doctrinal development. Today we can go buy the Bible in our local bookstore. We can consult *Luther's Small Catechism* for an understanding of what Scripture means. But in the earliest church, they were still discerning which writings were authentic and which ones were heretical counterfeits. They were having arguments about the meaning of Scripture that would eventually lead to the clarity we now take for granted. During these uncertain times, bishops and priests would appeal to what they called the "Rule of Faith" to distinguish truth from error. This was a creed-like summary of the plot of Scripture that these writers said was given by the Apostles themselves. And that is how the Apostle's Creed got its name, from the legend that the twelve Apostles each contributed a part, even though this is widely considered a mere legend.

So enough talking about it. Let's get into it. The following is the Apostle's Creed broken into the three "articles" according to Luther's teaching, and his explanation:

Luther's Small Catechism – The Creed

The First Article: On Creation

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

What is this? OR What does this mean?

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property - along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects

me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

The Second Article: On Redemption

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 [or, "he descended into hell," another translation of this text in widespread use]. 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.

What is this? OR What does this mean?

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.

The Third Article: On Being Made Holy

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.

What is this? OR What does this mean?

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of

all believers. On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Essay Questions

In your own words, answer the following questions below in 100-150 words each and return them to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, March 28.

Answer two of the following (1-4):

- 1) In my presentation, I mentioned *heretic* and *heresy*.
 - a. Reflect on what and who these are.
 - b. Name a modern-day heretic and what their heresy is.
 - c. Who decided back in the first ten centuries who was a heretic and who wasn't, and who decides today? Or Do we name people heretics today?
- 2) In a perfect world, a Christian would agree with every other Christian – a complete harmony of belief. Of course, that doesn't seem possible even in individual churches, let alone the overall Christian faith. Why is it so hard for Christians to agree?
- 3) First Article: What do the Creed and Luther mean by saying that God is the creator of heaven and earth? What does that include? What does that leave out? What also comes with God being the creator?
- 4) What does it mean that we call God "the Father" in the Creed, and "our Father" in the Lord's Prayer?

Answer one of the following:

- 5) Second Article: In the Second Article, we claim to "believe in Jesus Christ ..." But what does it mean to believe in him? Believe what about him?
- 6) In Luther's explanation, he claims that belief in Jesus Christ means that we "belong to him" (Jesus Christ). What does this mean to you? If this statement is true for you, how do you demonstrate it?

Answer one of the following:

- 7) Third Article: In the Third Article, we claim that faith is not something we can achieve but is a calling from the Holy Spirit. How do you feel this is true for you in your life?

8) We claim we believe in the catholic church. I thought we were Lutheran.
What does the creed mean? And what does it mean to be a part of the "one
holy catholic church?"