



THE CREED

WHAT WE BELIEVE



Apostles' Creed Intro **Acts 17:16-31**

Last week we finished up our series through 1 Peter, which means this morning we are beginning a new sermon series. Today we will begin a series called “The Creed,” which is a walkthrough of what is historically known as the “Apostles’ Creed,” and I will explain more about that in a moment.

We will spend about twelve weeks going through the creed and then the plan is to go through the letter of 2 Peter, look at some Psalms this summer, and tentatively go through the book of Galatians this fall. So if you want to study ahead, that is where we are going.

But again, we are beginning a study of the Apostles’ Creed, and I realize that for some you are pretty familiar with the Apostles’ Creed, maybe you’ve heard of it before or maybe you’ve memorized before. Our Institute Systematic Theology class this last fall memorized it together. But I also realize for others you may have no idea what the Apostles’ Creed is, in fact, you may have no idea what a creed is at all, so, I want to try and give a brief introduction to the idea of creeds and confessions and then give some explanation of the Apostle’s Creed specifically. And then we will look at the first line of the creed today.

I. What are creeds and why are they important?

Because we stand in the line of the great Protestant tradition, that protested against Church Tradition and boldly declared *Sola Scripture* or “Scripture Alone,” it might be tempting to protest against anything like a historic confession or creed. In fact, it has been said by some that we should not adhere to any creed or confession because we have the Bible and it is our authority. And so a popular phrase became, “No creed but the Bible!”

Well, that sentiment is misguided for a number of reasons. First of all, to say, “No creed but the Bible,” is a creed in and of itself. So, in trying to deny historic creeds they just created a new one.

But that raises the second reason that a denial or ignorance of historic creeds and confessions is misguided, and that is because every Christian and every church already has some kind of creed. What I mean by that is that if someone were to ask you, “What is the Bible about? What does the Bible teach?” You would not reply by quoting Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” and then just continue quoting the entire Bible all the way to the end of Revelation 22 to answer their question. Rather, what you and I would do is try to summarize the story of Scripture and the doctrines that it teaches.

And this is what the historic Creeds and Confessions of faith attempted to do. Offer a summary of orthodox Christian Doctrine as taught by the Bible. And that last part is important. Creeds are not supplements to the Bible, as if they are something to believe in addition to Scripture. They are rather summaries of biblical doctrine. So, creeds are means by which we can teach Christian Doctrine, memorize biblical truth, *and* more easily identify false teaching.

But creeds and confessions do something else for us that is really important. It connects us here in Rochester in 2022 to the Church of the past. This is incredibly important for us to learn and remember. The church is bigger than just us in this place at this time. The foundation of the church lies in the past, we are responsible for stewarding the truths of that foundation in our current context. Understand, we are not in need of new truth. We need ancient truth applied to our new contexts. In fact, it is a major red flag whenever you hear someone on a podcast, or read a new book, or read a blog article making the claim that they have discovered some new truth about God or the Christian faith or that they have “reimagined” some doctrine for our contemporary times. That will almost always lead to something borderline unbiblical if not outright heretical.

And that is not a new thing, that has always happened. Listen to the charge made by the apostle Paul to young Timothy...

1 Timothy 6:20-21

20 O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge,” **21** for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

Again, he says you’ve been entrusted with a “deposit,” that is, the gospel. What Scripture says about God and his work through his Son. Avoid those who claim to have a so-called higher “knowledge” if it swerves from the faith. He calls that “irreverent babble.”

And then in 2 Timothy he writes...

2 Timothy 1:13-14

13 Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. **14** By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

Again Timothy, “guard” what has been entrusted to you. He says, “Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me.” That Greek word for “sound” can mean “healthy.” In other words, give yourself to that truth that is good for you, anything else is unhealthy.

Now, I am not particularly a health food person. Actually I’m not at all. But one thing I definitely stay away from is poison. I’m no doctor, but I find that is a generally good practice to live by - don’t eat or drink poison. When it comes to our beliefs about God, Jesus, the world, and ourselves, the consequences for having those wrong is far greater than just being a bit unhealthy. They can have eternal consequences, so, it’s important that we learn, know, and continue to walk in the historic faith of the Church, and creeds and confessions help us with that, the Apostles’ Creed being one of the most important in church history.

II. What is the Apostles’ Creed?

So, what is the Apostles’ Creed? Despite its name, this creed was not written by the apostles, however, it was really the first recorded attempt to summarize the apostles’ teaching, so that’s why it got its name.

Again, this was used to help combat against false teaching that so commonly spread in the early church and so a summary of the Christian faith as taught by the apostles became popular and spread amongst the early church. The first recording of the creed was in the writing of St. Ambrose of Milan in 389 A.D. and was formalized in 800 A.D. when reciting the creed became a regular part of the church gathering. Oftentimes, a candidate for baptism would have to learn the creed and recite to express their knowledge and adherence to the Christian faith.

There is obviously much more to say about the Apostles’ Creed than we have time this morning. But thankfully we have put together a resource to help us dig deeper into the creed and Christian doctrine. Abbey Sitterley and Andrea Burke put together a tremendous resource filled with personal study questions, group study questions, home discipleship ideas, and verse memorization. And in it, there is a list of recommended resources at the back with books and sermon series you can find if you’d like to dig in more than we have time for here. There are 150 physical copies of this in the lobby, we will have more available next week. Also, there is a digital copy as well that was sent this morning in the announcement email and should be available on

the church website. So, let me encourage you to use this resource over the next couple of months as we walk through this series.

Well, with that very brief introduction, let me read the text of the Apostles' Creed for us and then we will look at the first line today...

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead and on the third day rose again. He ascended to 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.

A few things to notice before we get into it. First, this is not a comprehensive explanation of orthodox Christian doctrine. There are other doctrines that we would include as necessary for a biblical faith. For example the creed doesn't say anything about the inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word, the Bible. It doesn't mention specifically the deity of Jesus. It doesn't mention anything about justification by faith alone. So, there is more to orthodox Christian faith, but the Apostles' Creed offers the bare minimum when we discuss Christianity.

Al Mohler explained, "All Christians believe more than is contained in the Apostles' Creed, but none can believe less."¹ So, the Apostles' Creed really is a starting point for discussing and thinking about Christianity. And there might be a statement or two in there that at first reading sounds odd, but hang in there, we will be explaining them each week, they aren't as odd as they sound.

Second thing to notice, each section of the creed begins with "I believe." Christians are a people of faith, however, our faith is not simply in faith. We have faith in propositional truths. And this is important in our postmodern and deconstructing era. Agnosticism, theism, or mere spirituality is not the same thing as following the historic Christian faith. Orthodox Christianity declares certain things to be true while anything to the contrary as false. Again, it is not a vague spirituality but faith in declared truths about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God's work to save man.

So, this morning we are going to look at the first line, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty."

III. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty"

¹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), xvi.

Needless to say, Christians believe in God. Obviously, that is not a belief that is universally held, and is held less and less in our country.

There was a poll done recently by the Pew Research Center that showed secularism continues to grow in America.² It showed that the category labeled as religious “nones,” not “nuns” like Catholic nuns, but “none” as in nothing, has grown quite a bit. This category is made up of people who declare themselves to be atheist, agnostic, or just “nothing in particular” and it has grown to 30% of the American population, which might not sound like a lot, but that is up 10% from just 10 years ago. So, there is a strong wave of this thinking about God and life in at least our part of the world.

And I know that perhaps some here this morning might actually identify themselves in that category. You aren’t quite sure if there is a God, at least as described in the Bible or by Christians, or you definitely don’t believe in God but you are there this morning for some reason, maybe because you wanted to appease someone who invited you or brought you.

I would want to challenge your thinking this morning if that is you. Or maybe you would call yourself a Christian but you know a lot of people who don’t and you just don’t know how to talk to them about it. Well, there are a few things to consider when we talk about belief in God.

First, believing in God is **rational**. And that might sound way off or completely wrong to some, because in your mind, the idea of a Supreme Being who created all things sounds far more irrational than rational, but there are good reasons to believe in God.

One rational reason is the existence and fine tuning of the universe. I know we will talk more about this idea next Sunday when we look at the next line of the creed, that God is “creator of heaven and earth,” so I’ll leave this idea for then.

But, a second rational reason to believe in God is the existence of beauty and meaning. Keller asks, “If we are the product of the meaningless, accidental forces of nature, believers ask, how do you account for the sense we have that beauty matters, that love and life are significant?”³ In other words, if the material is all that there is, where does the idea of beauty come from? Where does the idea of love come from?

Much more could be said obviously, but we would argue that belief in God is first of all rational, but secondly, belief in God is **inherent**. It might seem like a radical idea but even if you say you don’t believe in God, you actually do believe in God and this is

² “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 145.

shown in not only your appreciation for beauty and love, but also by your belief in morality. Even those who don't believe in God probably believe that there is a right and wrong, there is such a thing as moral and immoral. There are such things as human rights. But the question is posed then, where do those come from? They are not relativistic, individually or culturally, they are not the result of the survival of the fittest, rather, they are given by God, the moral law-giver. In fact, if you don't believe in God then there is no basis for declaring things as moral or immoral, right or wrong, just or unjust, all you can say is "I like this or I don't like this" but you can't make an authoritative statement about right and wrong with any authoritative basis.

So, all of that to say, even the secular world that doesn't believe in God, continues to celebrate love and beauty and champion human rights and morality. But again, that is inconsistent with the naturalistic worldview. But the Bible says there is a reason for that inconsistency...

Romans 1:18-23

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. **21** For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools, **23** and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

What Paul is saying is that belief in God is inherent but it is suppressed in natural man because of their fallen sin nature. So this natural act of worship this has been wired into all men and women has shifted from the worship of the Creator to the worship of the creature, whether that is something in nature like animals or the sun, or something made by human hands like a physical idol, or the worship of humanity and self. Understand that all people worship.

But Christianity believes and proclaims that there is a God who has created all things and is distinct from his creation.

And so, to think about the rest of the first line, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty" I want us to take a brief look at Acts 17 this morning.

To understand where we are picking up in Luke's account of the early church, Acts 17 tells us about Paul's second missionary journey in which he travels with Silas and Timothy...

Acts 17:16-21

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. **17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. **18** Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities” — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. **19** And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” **21** Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So, the setting is that Paul had gone on ahead of Silas and Timothy to Athens and while there he was brokenhearted by what he saw. He saw a city filled with idols and so he began to preach, as he did on his missionary journeys. And while he was preaching he encountered some Epicureans and Stoics - these were schools of philosophic thought - and Paul was taken to the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill, because this really was the center for religious and civil life. This was the place to discuss new ideas.

And there Paul delivers an incredible message for the people...

Acts 17:22-23

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

He said, I’ve seen many, many idols in your city, but there was in particular I want to talk to you about. Again, they were religious, because worship is inherent. This is why we see this in every culture and place. And though we might not walk among idols like those in Athens, we are surrounded by other idols that our culture gives their worship too. Idols of success, influence, money and possessions, sex, and self dominate our world as people constantly give their created gods their worship.

But Christianity proclaims a different story. It’s the story of the one, true God. The One who truly deserves our worship and allegiance. Paul goes on to tell them about that God...

Acts 17:24-25

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Paul tells them and us something very important about God in contrast to the idols of this world. The One, true God is *transcendent*. In other words, God is above his creation, completely distinct from it. We'll talk more about that next week.

Paul specifically points to an attribute of God that theologically is called "aseity." And aseity means that God is completely independent and self-existent. God does not need someone or something else to exist, he is life in and of himself.

God isn't needy. God was not eternally bored, so he needed to create the world and create you and me to fulfill something in him that was lacking. We on the other hand, need others to live. We needed life given to be given to us and for God to sustain us, but God is not that way. Again, he is life in and of himself.

And this is very important to our understanding of God, especially when, for example, we think of worship. When we worship the Lord it isn't an act of us giving something that God needs to stroke his ego or build his self-esteem. Worship is due to God not because he needs us but because we need him. We need to set our eyes and hearts on God, recognizing that he is the Lord Almighty and that we are not.

But God's aseity, God's self-existence, is important for our salvation as well. Consider what would be true if God wasn't independent of us and life in and of himself. Matthew Barrett writes, "[God] would be weak and pathetic, for he would be needy and dependent too. He would need saving, just as we do. He would be a God like us not a God distinct from the world. 'We might pray *for* this God, but definitely not *to* him.'"⁴

But because God is life, we can find life in God. We can look to him for help, mercy, sustaining grace, and hope. Thankfully, we can say, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty..."

"Almighty" in the creed is written with intent to encompass all of God's incommunicable attributes, those we don't share with him and can't share with him. That God is unchanging, all-powerful, all-wise, sovereign, eternal, perfectly righteous and holy, and incomprehensible. Again, he is transcendent.

But there is more good news about life under a transcendent God and that is that he is still knowable, and knowable in an unbelievably intimate way...

Acts 17:26-31

26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for "In him we live and move and have

⁴ Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 69.

our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring.' **29** Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

In the rest of the written record of Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, he declares the God that you don't know or recognize, is the Almighty Creator, and yet he can be known. Though he doesn't need me and doesn't need you, he invites you into a relationship with him. Though he is transcendent, he is immanent, or he is near.

What Paul doesn't mention here, at least it wasn't recorded for us if he did there at Mars Hill, is that not only can God merely be known, as someone we have knowledge of, but he can be known as our Father.

ILLUS. - I have had to go to court one time in my life, other than for jury duty. When I was sixteen, just a couple of months of having my license I was driving as the policeman said, "recklessly," so he wanted to make sure I learned a lesson and I had to go to court for my ticket. So, I went to court on my court date. Because I was a minor my Dad went with me and he stood with me in front of the judge. The judge asked, "How do you want to plead?" I leaned into the mic and said, "Guilty." It was a moment I probably won't ever forget. I was given a fine to pay and class I had to go through.

Salvation is described in legal terms. We stand before God as judge, but without a father standing next to us. But the good news is, we acknowledge our guilt before the judge and instead of trying to pay the debt ourselves, we accept the payment already paid by Jesus. And God, the judge, looks at us and says, "innocent." And even better than that, God, the judge looks at you and me and says, "Not only are you innocent, I am going to adopt you into my family. You are not only free to go, but you get to come home with me.

Romans 8:15-16

15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" **16** The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God

Based on our repentant faith in Christ, the Spirit is given to us who adopts us into a right relationship with God. And now, instead of looking to God in fear we look to him as our Father.

Ephesians 1:3-6

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** even as he chose us in him

before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Why did God adopt us? It wasn't because he needed us, but because he loved us. In his work in the gospel, he gave himself to us to the praise of his glorious grace.

Conclusion and Communion

Yes, there is a God who reigns over all. But he is not indifferent to you and me. He is not apathetic to you and this world. He is not removed from what is happening in the world today or in your life today. The transcendent God is near and he can also be called your Father.

As the creed states, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty."

And the opportunity to know this transcendent God as father was accomplished by sending His Son, Jesus, in the flesh to walk among us, go to the cross, shed his blood for our sins that had separated us from God, and raise from the dead securing our victory over sin and death. And by repenting of our sin, turning away from sin and turning to God in faith, we can be put into right relationship with God, the Father Almighty.

John 1:11-13

11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. **12** But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, **13** who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

So, if you have never heard the good news that God is not someone to simply tremble before but is someone to joyfully run to, the gospel invites you to come to him. Lay down your self-righteousness and sin, and put your faith in Christ's finished work for you today, and come to know the Almighty God as your Father.

If you have done that, remember this morning the incredible grace shown to you and me that we might know and love the God of the Universe and that we call him father. And again, all of this by the broken body and shed blood of his Son, Jesus.

As observe communion this morning, we want to remember these truths. Because of our sin, we had no right to stand before a transcendent and holy God. But Jesus took on flesh to offer it for your sin and mine. As we eat the bread this morning we remember the flesh he donned and allowed to be torn and beaten. As we drink the juice we remember the blood that spilled to atone for our sins. So, if you are a Christian this morning you welcome to observe the Lord's Supper this morning, if you are not,

we would encourage you to not participate because in taking the elements you are identifying with the body and blood of Christ.

I want us to take a minute to ourselves for a time of silent prayer and confession, confessing our unworthiness, our sin, and also praising the Lord for his forgiveness and grace. After that, I will pray for us, and then you are invited to take the elements any time during the last two songs.

VERSES

1 Timothy 6:20-21

2 Timothy 1:13-14

Text of the Apostles' Creed

Romans 1:18-23

Acts 17:16-21

Acts 17:22-23

Acts 17:24-25

Acts 17:26-31

Romans 8:15-16

Ephesians 1:3-6

John 1:11-13

Study Guide with discussion questions are available online.