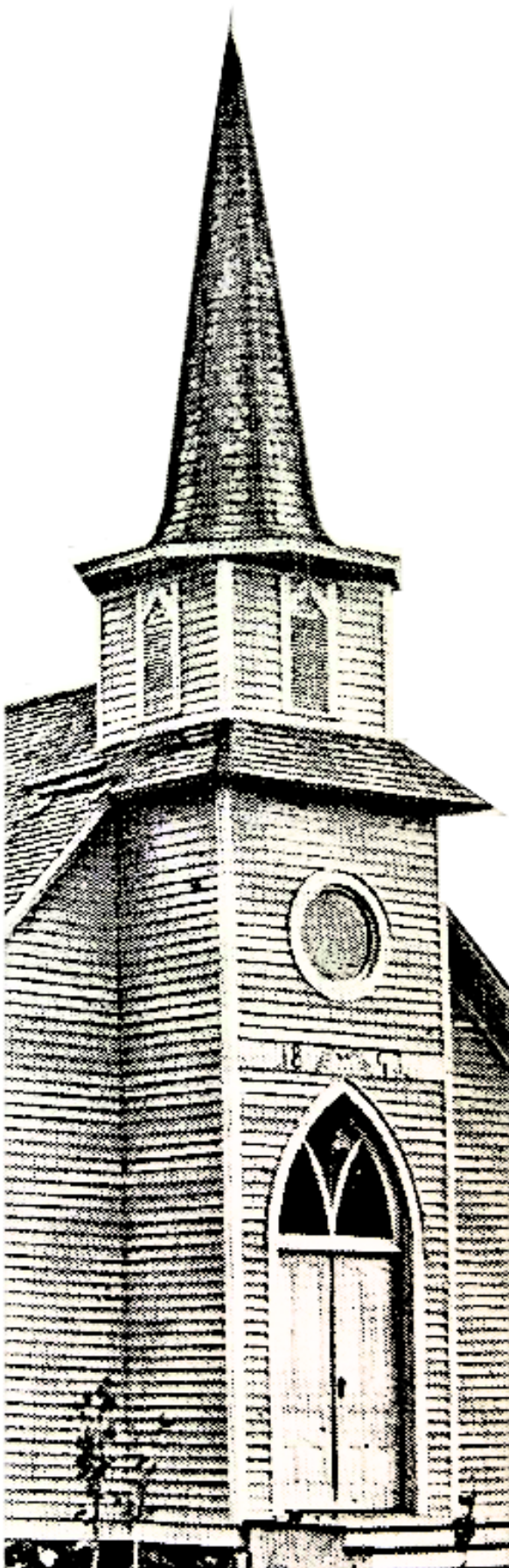


The “I” of the Apostles’ Creed



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

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again 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.

The “I” of the Apostles’ Creed

“I will be with you.” (Exodus 3:12)

Theology is the study of *God*. Perhaps you’ve noticed that Bible studies, sermons, devotions, Christian podcasts, Christian books, and other Christian outlets sometimes have more to say about *you* or *us* as people than they say about *God*. Strict theologians have an adverse and spirited reaction to this problem, accusing their opponents of talking too much about *people* and not enough about *God*. “After all,” they say, “theology is the study of *God*.” The worry of slipping into the study of *people* and not *God* often elicits a 180-degree turn for the strict theologians: Those attempting to keep theology pure in its definitional sense end up only talking about *God* and what he is doing. You can’t hardly fault them. They’re only attempting to keep theology pure, in that it is the study of *God* (not *people*). On the other side, those who say more about *people* point a finger at the strict theologians, saying that they’re too “impersonal.” The battle lines are drawn.

The Apostles’ Creed beginning with the word “I” must drive those interested in “strict theology” (in its definitional sense) insane. One of the tenants of this strict theology is that *people* are never doing the action. *God* is always the one doing the action. The Apostles’ Creed causes concern with those who favor this approach, simply because it begins with the person, “I,” and not *God*. On the other hand, the rest of the Apostles’ Creed is about the action of *God*. There’s very little talk of the “I” and there’s absolutely no direction for what the “I” should be doing. This must be a sore spot with those who favor a “*where do I fit?*”-approach.

The absence of “I’s” role in the Apostles’ Creed almost makes it unusable for those who want to see themselves in the story. The Apostles’ Creed details the activity of *God* while “I” plays almost no part. As such, the Apostles’ Creed is a bit of a conundrum for both parties.

The strict theologians realize that theology, if it’s going to be theology, has to be about *God*. Those who want to see how they, personally, fit into what’s going on realize that theology is incredibly personal and relational. Instead of picking a preferable ditch in this debate, perhaps it’s more fruitful to simultaneously consider the questions by which both groups approach the Apostles’ Creed. The strict theologians ask, “What is *God* up to here?” and those wondering where they belong ask, “How am I involved with *God*?”

One of the strict theologians’ greatest contributions is that they insist on *God*’s activity and humanity’s passivity. This means that *God* is always the one doing the activity. If humanity is involved in the story, its role is passive. Humanity is the beneficiary of the actions of *God*. Humanity is always the object – the receiver. *God* is always the subject – the doer. In this way, the “I” of the Apostles’ Creed does not stand at the front as an act-er or a doer. Instead, the “I” stands at the beginning as a witness. The story of the Apostles’ Creed is not about the “I,” but the “I” is the beneficiary, the object of the activity, the experiencer, the receiver, the one who went through *God*’s activity and was changed by *God*’s activity. The strict theologians must find a way to

somehow understand the "I" of the Apostles' Creed as passive. Understanding the "I" as a witness maintains the "I's" passivity. This contribution from the strict theologians keeps the onus on God. Their question by which they approach the "I" of the Apostles' Creed (What is God up to here?) considers their understanding of the "I" as a witness and God as the one doing something worthy of witnessing.

A significant contribution from the other approach is its recognition that the "I" of the Apostles' Creed and God share a very personal relationship. There were other potential suitors to begin the Creed. The Apostles' Creed does not begin with "I" out of necessity. It could have just as easily started "The Church believes in God, the Father..." The Creed could have started "Christians believe..." It could have started "Believers...", "Followers...", or "Disciples..." All of these could have been used. All these other options would mean slightly different things from each other and would have certain nuances or maybe even pitfalls. None of them would have been much more drastic than the others, though. They're somewhat synonymous with each other, at least in the context that we're considering. The most drastic option is the one that is actually used: "I." Using "I" brings the conversation out of the realm of simple facts about Christians, the Church, or Disciples. When "I" is employed, no longer can the Creed be viewed as mere "facts about God" or "identifiers/characteristics of God." Using "I" brings the conversation much closer to home, putting me personally and directly in the crosshairs of God's activity. It's one thing to have facts about God. It's common for people to have ideas about who God is, what he's like, some of the things he's done, etc. There are even agreed-upon basics for God in general - what God is like in the abstract. The bible develops a robust and diverse treasury of

these facts about God. Some find God to be loving, merciful, and peaceful. Others may paint a darker, gloomier picture of God - judgmental, confusing, demanding. Many attempts have been made to describe the character of God, which is a reasonably safe game to play. Describing God in the abstract like this keeps him at a comfortable distance - not too involved with our day-to-day business. Considering how I am implicated in these facts about God opens up a new can of worms, though. This is the "danger" of the Apostles' Creed - it does not begin in the abstract. It is not simply objective facts about God. The Apostles' Creed is the confession, the faith statement, or the witness of someone whom God has gotten imminently close with. By saying "I," at the beginning of the creed, we're saying that God comes out of the abstract. By saying "I" we're making these "facts about God" personal so that, now, they are no longer just facts about God. Now we're saying something about how God not only operates in our lives but how he actually gives us life. That God would concern himself with me on such a molecular level is utterly surprising. God steps out of heaven and into earth. He arrives right in the middle of life and not just someone else's life or some group's life (there's no "safety" or comfort in numbers here). He arrives dramatically in the middle of my life.

So both the strict theology approach and the "Where do I fit in?"-approach have something to offer in terms of detailing the "I" of the Apostles' Creed. If only we can stay on the thin line of not falling into one approach completely, a unique balance can be experienced. Both the objective approach of God being the doer and the "How do I fit in?"-approach of intimate relationship can both be realized. This happens when God acts (makes a promise) imminently and specifically (to you) by the preached word. An example of this is God's

promise to Moses in Ex. 3:12: "I will be with you." Here you have the action of God and the passivity of humanity which pleases the strict theologians. You also have the imminency and personability which pleases the folks looking for those aspects. But to make those looking for where they fit in completely satisfied, this cannot remain an example. The only way to make it actually imminent and personal is to not give it as an example of God associating with someone else, but to give it as a preached word. It cannot remain a Bible story. The promise must become a preached word, a live wire, a here-and-now commitment from God. How it becomes this is simple. The promise from God is given imminently and specifically to you in the preached word.