

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

Genesis 1:1-5 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalms 91:1-3; 14-16 (NRSV)

¹ You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
² will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."
³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
¹⁴ Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵ When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Matthew 7:7-11 (NRSV)

⁷"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ⁹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? ¹⁰Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Each week we stand together to affirm and proclaim the essential truths about God and his work in this world. But what does this Affirmation of Faith really mean? And what are its implications for us and our life with one another and with God?

This is the first in a seven-part series on the Apostles' Creed, the affirmation of faith that we stand together and proclaim on many occasions when we gather to worship. We'll explore a section of the creed each week, but we first need to learn a bit about the creed's origin and purposes.

The origin of the Apostles' Creed

Christians have been standing and proclaiming the Apostles' Creed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The immediate forerunner of the Apostles' Creed was known as

What is a creed?

A creed is a statement of faith, a succinct and sometimes poetic presentation of the essentials of the Christian faith. A creed lays out the basic public proclamation that Christians present to the world.

The word "creed" is based on the Latin word *credo* which means "I believe" or "I trust" or "I have faith that . . ."

From the earliest days of Christianity, we have used creeds of one sort or another to present and clarify the essentials. The creed expresses our "oneness" as the community of God's people. This is why we always say it as a community, even though it begins "I believe . . ." The creed's own "oneness" can be seen in its Trinitarian outline: One God – Father, Son, & Holy Spirit.

When we come to the creeds it is always a good idea to remember one of John Wesley's favorite sayings: "In the essentials, unity; in all else, liberty; in everything, charity."

A creed is all about capturing the "essentials," those beliefs about which all Christians ought to agree.

the Roman Creed, having come from the church in Rome. It was very similar to the creed we say now and would seem very familiar to you.

The creed grew out of the baptismal questions that people new to the faith were asked to affirm. Still today, those being baptized (or their sponsors) are asked to affirm certain statements of faith at every baptism we perform. Here are the baptismal questions from Rome dating back to at least 200AD:

- "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?"
- "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?"
- "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?"

We affirm every portion of every one of these questions whenever we stand to recite the Apostles' Creed.

The pro's and con's of creeds

Not all Christian denominations embrace the historic creeds of the church, though nearly all have some statement of what they believe. Here are some of the pro's and con's when it comes to creeds:

- Pro's
 - Creeds help us to clarify, proclaim, and protect the essential claims of our faith. Many creeds resulted from heretical threats to the faith.
 - The creeds help us to recognize inadequate or incorrect descriptions of our faith.
 - Creeds carry the tradition that we have received from the Christians who preceded us. Creeds remind us that there is one "cloud of saints."
 - Creeds help provide us with a framework for interpreting Scripture and for teaching the basic Christian beliefs, which is exactly what we are doing in this series.
- Con's
 - Creeds can be used to exclude and enforce.
 - No creed can substitute for our engagement with Scripture.
 - No creed can be complete.
 - No creed can be final.

The big picture

Take a look at the Apostles' Creed (text box on p. 4). You'll quickly see that (1) it is Trinitarian, organized around the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and (2) it is narrative, beginning with creation and moving on to Jesus and then the church.

What's missing? A lot. First, you can't call the creed a summary of the biblical story, for where is any mention of Israel or the Law and the Prophets? Second, nothing is stated outright about Jesus' divinity nor about the Spirit's divinity. This would come in the later creeds. For example, in the Nicene Creed of 325AD (drafted to confront the claim that Jesus wasn't truly God) Jesus is "very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father; through whom [Jesus] all things were made." Third, though the creed affirms the forgiveness of sins, nothing is said specifically about how we are saved and there is no mention of grace or faith.

When we say the creed we inevitably read a lot into it. The creed is not meant to cover all the bases, just the essentials. It isn't the place for our "intramural" arguments about

justification or sanctification or most of the important issues that we talk about in the church. The creed is meant to unite, not divide.

God and the Trinity

Though the Apostles' Creed is inherently Trinitarian, that doesn't mean the relational nature of God is well-developed in it. The creed comes from a time when that theological work was still underway. Nonetheless, there are a few points that need to be made here.

First, because of Scripture's teachings on Jesus and the fact that the earliest Christians worshiped Jesus as they had worshiped God, the early church had to wrestle with some key questions:

- Is the Father, God? Is the Son, God? Is the Spirit, God?
 - Is each person of the Trinity addressed by distinguishable divine names?
 - Is each person assumed to have divine attributes?
 - Does each person engage in actions that only God can accomplish?
 - Is each person thought to be worthy of divine worship?

In each case, the Church answered "yes." The mystery of the Trinity, one God of one "substance" yet three persons, is the most profound of all the mysteries we proclaim. Yet, it is absolutely essential to who we are and to the Good News we proclaim to the world. And we are led to it every time we answer the question, "Who is Jesus?," as nearly all his disciples have answered it for 2,000 years.

Daniel Migliore lifts up for us three key Christian affirmations that arise from our belief in the Trinity:

- The eternal life of God is personal life in relationship. God *IS* love (1 John 4:16b) – this makes sense only because of God's inherent relationality. God's identity is personal relationship.
- God exists in community. Yes, God has a social life! The three persons of God "indwell" each other. God then creates a people to live in relationship with him.
- The life of God is essentially self-giving love.

The Father

The portrait of God¹ as Father cuts across both Testaments. In the Old Testament, God is the Father of his people and the husband to his bride. But, in contrast to the New Testament, there are no prayers to the Father in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is simply referred to as *el* (the word for "god") or by God's name, YHWH (for which, LORD, is substituted in the English translations).

There is often some confusion around God and the Father. God is not synonymous with the Father. The Father is fully and completely God but is *not* all of God. The same is true of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Father is one of the three persons of the Trinity.

The Apostles' Creed probably exacerbates this problem in that it goes: "I believe in God the Father Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ . . . in the Holy Spirit." Something like this would be more accurate: "I believe in God, and in the Father Almighty . . . in Jesus Christ . . . in the Holy Spirit."

The New Testament has a much fuller expression of God as Father, emphasizing covenantal intimacy. Jesus even uses the familiar *abba* (sort of like "papa") to refer to the Father and Paul urges all Christians to do the same. This parental portrait is one of the most intimate expressions of our relationship to God. As a teacher, I find the parent/child

¹Allan Coppedge's book, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness*, is very helpful in seeing the larger picture of this "portrait" and others, such as "good shepherd" and "righteous judge." It is more a reference book than a read-straight-through book, but if you are interested in the full biblical witness to the metaphors used to talk about God, this book is a great resource.

analogy to be one of the most important in seeking to understand our claims about God and how he works in this world.

God as Father encompasses two key tasks of fathers and, more broadly, parents. First, parents provide the child with standards, instruction, and discipline. Second, good parents shower their children with love, affection, encouragement, and support.

Almighty

“Almighty” translates the Latin *omnipotens* (omnipotent) and the Greek *pantokrator* (ruler of all things).² Interestingly, in the New Testament, “Almighty” is found only in Revelation. Obviously, however, just because the specific word *pantokrator* is rarely used, the affirmation that God is all-powerful and the ruler of all things is found from Genesis to Revelation.

Are we affirming that God can do anything? *No!* Could God lie? Could God act unjustly? Could God die? To understand what we mean by saying that God is all-powerful, we must look to God’s character, which is revealed in what God has done. And that is the story told by Scripture.

But we *are* affirming that God is in charge. This is God’s cosmos. His purposes for his cosmos will be accomplished. But how God’s sovereignty plays out is something that Christians have debated for two millennia and will continue to debate until Jesus returns. For example, how does God accomplish God’s purposes but not trample all over our free will? In all our many discussions and even arguments, the affirmation that God is the “Almighty” reminds us that all of God’s promises will be kept.

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our
Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy
Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the
dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of
God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to
judge the quick 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.

Maker of heaven and earth

Here, we affirm that God is the creator of all things. If it exists, God created it. The classic Christian doctrine is that God created everything *ex nihilo*, from nothing. There was no pre-existing raw material that God worked with. God simply created. And not just the material stuff of the cosmos, but the immaterial as well. Again, if it exists – at all, in any form – God created it. And God created it “good.”³

True, the world is no longer as God created it. It has been terribly distorted and warped by sin and awaits its own redemption. Sickness, tragedy, death are all symptoms of this distortion. But still, God’s purpose is to renew his creation, not destroy it.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let’s look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God’s creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be

escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God’s kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God’s kingdom evident to all. We can’t build the kingdom, that is God’s work, but we can build *for* the kingdom. Every kind touch, every

²There were both Latin and Greek versions of the creed.

³Thus, going back to the study on God and evil (January 17, 2010), you’ll recall that Christian theologians have been careful to state that evil is nothingness, i.e., not created, non-existent.

mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice – none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God’s renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical *and* the spiritual.⁴

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our church is made up of people who come from a variety of church backgrounds and some who didn’t grow up in the church. What is your own experience with creeds? With the Apostles’ Creed? What have you seen as the purpose of the creed? What in this study surprised you in regards to the purpose and the pros/cons of creeds?
2. Our affirmation that God is Trinitarian (one God, three persons) often seems dry and irrelevant to many Christians. However, it is foundational to all things Christian. Why do you think I’d make such a claim? What does Jesus, and hence the Trinity, reveal to us about God that we would not otherwise know?
3. I’ve learned that people have widely varying experiences with fathers – some wonderful, some not. How has your relationship with your own father or even father-figures in your life shaped your thoughts and feelings about God the Father? How might expanding father into parent reshape your understanding of God?
5. If God is truly the Almighty, the *pantokrator*, the ruler of all things, what sort of claim does God have on your life? Is there any portion of your life over which God does not rule? Is there anyone on earth over whom God is not the ruler? These seemingly innocuous affirmations about God are really quite weighty and meaningful, aren’t they!
6. We are part of God’s creation. We are to build for God’s kingdom and the renewal of all things. What are you doing today to build in ways large and small?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:1-6 The unity of God</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 3:16-17; Matt. 28:19 The three persons of the Trinity</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 8:12-17 We are led by the Spirit of God and may cry “Abba! Father” when we call out to him.</p>	<p>Thursday, Psalm 91 Living in the shadow of the Almighty</p>
<p>Friday, Genesis 1 God creates</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

⁴N.T. Wright expressed this far better in a sermon entitled, “New Life – New World,” from his book *Following Jesus*. His sermon collections always make for worthwhile reading.

