

## The Apostles Creed

Turn to Acts 16. Today we'll look at the Apostles Creed. The apostles did not write this. But it does summarize their teachings. It is simple, brief, and solemn. In its present form it is dated no later than the 300s. More than any other Christian creed, this unites the church now, and has done so for 1700 years, or more.

Why a creed at all? We will begin with a story from Acts. Let's read Acts 16:23–34.

*After Paul and Silas had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"*

*The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.*

The jailer asks, "what must I do to be saved?" What does he think he needs to be saved from? A minute ago he was ready to commit suicide, because if prisoners escaped he would be executed. Do we have any reason to think he wants to be saved from his sins? Not much. We don't know what he was thinking. He slept through the singing. He does not know much.

Paul says, "believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." What does this jailer actually know about the Lord Jesus? Not very much. Quite likely, he knows absolutely nothing about Jesus, never heard of him till that moment. Then Paul and Silas "*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*" That's where the jailer found out what it really meant to be "saved," and he found out who the Lord Jesus was.

"They spoke the word of the Lord to them"? What exactly did they say? That's what we want to know.

Paul and Silas were in Philippi in about the year 50. Let's fast forward 100 years. It is now they year 150, and a woman who's been a believer for a couple of years leads her sister to the Lord. The sister wants that too, whatever it is. "What must I do to be saved?" The one who's been a believer says, "believe on the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved." Okay, that's fine, but who is Jesus? Saved from what? What should I believe?

Last Sunday, we read 12 different paragraphs from the New Testament that were written to be brief summaries of what we believe. And there are a few others. The answer of the early church was summaries like the Apostles Creed. They were short concise summaries of essential faith, taken from the Bible's summaries.

There were many different summaries like the Apostles Creed, none of them official, just put together by the leaders in that area to be used by the believers in that area. Most of these read much like the apostles creed, same kind of outline and same basic details.

They used them for baptism. If you wanted to be a believer, these were the things you needed to understand and commit yourself to. And they used them in worship. The congregation read them out together, to declare their faith, and to remind themselves what was important.

That's why it is good for us to take a look at this creed. It's good for us to know what they thought was central. They were a lot closer to the roots of the church. Society had not changed much from the year 50 to the year 150. What they thought was important will be important for us, too.

We read certain Lord's Supper words every Sunday. The congregation says some of these words out loud every Sunday. These repeated words shape what you and I believe, don't they. Without ever trying to make it happen, words like that shape our minds over time, and that is a good thing. I'm not saying that we should use the Apostles Creed more often than we do. I am explaining why early worship often included the congregation reading this creed out loud every Lord's Day. Let's read it out.

*I believe in God the Father, Ruler of All,  
Creator of heaven and earth.*

*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 into death.  
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.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Holy Worldwide Church,  
the fellowship of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.*

## **1 I believe in God the Father**

Many early creeds used the Trinity as an outline: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Apostles Creed does that.

*I believe in God the Father, Ruler of All,  
Creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in God the Father:*

The later church took “Father” in the trinitarian sense, the Father of Jesus the Son. At the start it was more about God our Father. When Jesus taught his followers about God, it was almost always, “your Father in heaven.” Above all, “God the Father” is “God our Father.”

*Ruler of All.*

The traditional word is “almighty,” “I believe in the Father Almighty.” In English, “almighty” means “power.” God is all powerful. But this creed was written in Greek, and the Greek word has more to do with ruling. God the Father *rules* all things, *has authority over* all things. I believe in God the Father, Ruler of All. Good to know.

*Creator of heaven and earth.*

In these early centuries, that our God created heaven and earth separated the Christian God from other gods. Their gods did not do that. That our God and Father created heaven and earth comes up many times in the Old Testament and many times in the New Testament. It is a basic and essential part of our faith.

## **2 I believe in Jesus Christ**

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*

Three big truths in that line. (1) I believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah that the Jewish prophets foretold. (2) I believe that Jesus was God's only Son. We also are God's sons and daughters, but not the way Jesus was. (3) I believe that Jesus is Lord, that he is our Lord.

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born of the Virgin Mary,  
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and he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

The New Testament "gospel" was first and foremost a summary of the life of Jesus: Birth, suffering, death for our sins, resurrection, exaltation, and future return in glory. If you knew the story of Jesus, you had heard the gospel. We saw this several times in the New Testament paragraphs we read last week.

Two things come through strongly in these nine lines. One is that our faith in Jesus is tied to real human history. Mary was a young single woman, pledged to be married to Joseph, who was a descendant of David. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor stationed in Jerusalem. We have a real place and a real time. Pilate governed there about ten years. Many religions have a hero, a champion, but he or she is always mythical, a "once upon a time" kind of person. The Apostles Creed emphasizes Jesus in a particular place at a particular time.

What also comes through clearly is that Jesus was totally human. *Many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.* 1 John 4:1-2.

Jesus was conceived, he was born, he suffered, he died, he was buried. That's the story, folks, that's our story, every one of us. True of every single human. Our faith is in a real person at a real time and place, and he was totally human. That's not all he was, but he was for sure totally human.

In the Apostles Creed, the emphasis is on Christ himself, which is just what we found in the New Testament summaries we read last week. The Creed has two lines about the God the Father, ten about Jesus, and six on the Holy Spirit and the rest. At the center of the Christian faith is this view of Jesus.

### **3 I Believe in the Holy Spirit**

*I believe in the Holy Spirit.*

This is not complicated. We put the Holy Spirit beside God the Father and Jesus the Son, which is important. The creed means to do that.

*I believe in the Holy Worldwide Church.*

The last five lines of the creed can seem like a catchall, “some other things we believe are important.” But the early fathers preached these final lines as the Holy Spirit in action, so I will take that approach.

I believe in the Holy Worldwide Church. *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. There is one body and one Spirit.* 1 Cor 12; Eph 4. By the one Holy Spirit, all believers are one holy body, one holy congregation, one sacred assembly. When we say, “I believe in the Holy Worldwide Church,” we are talking about ourselves. And this whole creed emphasizes what we have in common with all believers.

*I believe in the fellowship of saints.*

We read this last week, from the end of 2 Corinthians: *May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* We are not only one holy worldwide church, we also enjoy fellowship and oneness with each other. One of my favorite lines: *Amen I tell you, no one who has left brothers or sisters or mother or father or children for my sake and the sake of the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as many in this age: brothers and sisters, mothers and children.* Mark 10.

#### **4 Detour on “Holy”**

Now we need to talk about “holy.” “Saints” in Greek means “holy ones.” “I believe in the holy worldwide church, I believe in the fellowship of holy ones.” “Saints” in our day means exceptional Christians, but that’s not what it meant in the New Testament. What makes the worldwide church “holy,” and what makes us who have fellowship with each other “holy ones”?

God made Israel holy by a two-step process. First, God separated Israel from other nations. He led them out of Egypt into the wilderness. God separated them. Two, God took Israel for himself. He said, “you are mine, you are my possession.” At that point, Israel became a holy nation.

We become holy people, we become saints, by the same process. God separates for himself every person who says “Jesus is Lord,” and makes them his own. God says, “I paid for you with the death of my Son. Now you’re mine, you are my possession.” That makes us holy.

When we have the Lord’s Supper, we say, “God, you have said to us, ‘If you will be my people, I will be your God.’” Then we say, “You will be our God, and we will be your people.” That’s how we become holy. “Will you be my people? We will be your people.” God takes that conversation seriously. After that, we are urged to live holy lives. But holy lives aren’t how we become saints.

In the New Testament, we are called “believers” about 15 times. We are called “saints,” “holy people,” 60 times, four times as often as believers. It’s important. “I believe in the fellowship of the holy people.” Detour on “holy” is over.

*I believe in the forgiveness of sins.*

What a wonderful line! I believe in the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit’s presence proves this. Peter said, “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, *and you will receive the Holy Spirit.*” If we have the Holy Spirit, that means our sins are forgiven. And remember the great evidence of the Spirit: “*No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.*” I believe in the forgiveness of sins, and let us never forget it.

*I believe in the resurrection of the body.*

May there never be a Christian funeral that does not parade our preposterous hope. Again, may there never be a Christian funeral that does not parade our audacious hope. Our bodies will be raised, just as the Lord’s body was raised. Not a new body, which we know because his tomb was empty. The old body made new. Our present bodies restored and better than ever.

This is also from the Spirit, which we read last week. *Jesus was appointed the Son of God in power, through the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1). He was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit (1 Peter 3).* I believe in the resurrection of the body.

*I believe in the life everlasting.*

Some early believers worried that they would only be raised like Lazarus, raised only to die again later. They worried that their resurrection of their bodies would not be eternal like the Lord’s resurrection. So the leaders added “life everlasting” to make clear what kind of resurrection we believe in.

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Creator of heaven and earth.*

*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,  
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On the third day he rose again;  
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*he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Holy Worldwide Church,  
the fellowship of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

I am thankful for the Apostles Creed. I'm thankful that it is so old. I'm thankful that it is so faithful to New Testament teaching. And I'm thankful for how many churches all over the world still use this to stay on track.

PRAYER: Father, this creed comes from faithful faith ancestors. This comes from church leaders after the apostles who teach their people and keep them on track. Thank you for their insight and their work, and thank you for keeping this. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "hold fast to the traditions you were taught by us." Father, we want to hold fast to the very same traditions. Keep us centered. Amen.

BENEDICION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.

## Appendix

"He descended into hell." The older English versions included that line. The English word "hell" means something that ancient languages did not mean. At that time, to say that Jesus had died automatically meant that he had passed into the place of the dead. There is a pretty good chance that at the start, it was just a colourful way of saying he was dead and buried, to clear up any doubt about whether or not Jesus actually died. The newer versions all read, "he descended into death" and that is better.