

WHAT CHRISTIANITY WOULD MISS IF IT DIDN'T HAVE the APOSTLES' CREED

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What If ... People often ask hypothetical questions like, "What if Jesus had never been born?" or "What if the Bible had never been written?" This is an intriguing and provocative way of talking about the significance of Jesus or the Bible on the basis of their theoretical absence. Jesus and the Bible are obviously juicy topics, easily suited to such a loaded question, as the implications of their absence are both multiple and grim. I want to ask a similar question about the Apostles' Creed. In short: "What would we miss if we didn't have the Apostles' Creed?"

Now you may not know anything about the Apostles' Creed, what it says, where it is from, or how it is ordinarily used. You might belong to a church that has never asked its worshippers to recite the Apostles' Creed, never used the creeds for discipleship or to instruct baptism candidates, and your church perhaps has no reference to any creed in its doctrinal statement for that matter. So you might reply that, given the absence of the creed in your church and in your devotional life, one could pretty much continue life as normal if the Apostles' Creed had never been written. But I want to suggest that there might be a creed-shaped hole in your theology and spirituality. Just the Facts, Ma'am.

In counterpoint to a prevailing ignorance or disinterest in the Apostles' Creed among a broad selection of churches that are

evangelical, or Pentecostal, or mainline, I want to suggest that if the Apostles' Creed had never been written, we would indeed be missing something. While your church might not say creeds or refer to them, creeds, like the Apostles' Creed, are everywhere presupposed in the theological beliefs that Christians hold so dear. Here's the thing: the ancient creeds of the church don't just tell us some things that Christians might believe, a kind of take it or leave it offer; rather, they instruct us as to what Christians ought to believe. They are a summary of the core convictions of the universal Christian church spread throughout the world and even across different denominations. The creedal faith is the cradle of the church's confession about God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christianity is a religion based on revelation—truths which God has revealed to us about who he is, his person and plans—and we consider this to be true. Christians believe in truth because the church bases its testimony on the account of the news and narratives that God has revealed about himself in creation, in the history of Israel, in Scripture, through the Spirit, and definitively in Jesus Christ. This truth is not true-for-you-but-not-for-me truth, not truth as relative to my situation, not truth as something that helps me get by, but truth that is cosmic, universal, personal, transformative, and ultimately saving. It is the truth about God, God's Son, and our salvation. Although faith is more than assent to certain facts, it is not less than assent. That is why Paul talks about being saved by believing the truth, telling the Thessalonians, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the

sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13). And similarly, Paul reminds Timothy that God our Savior "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). If we are saved by knowing God, then in order to know him we must believe about him and believe in him. We must believe that God exists, that God has reconciled us to himself in Jesus Christ, and that God is experienced afresh in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, what we believe determines what we value and shapes how we live, so beliefs really do matter. And this is where the creeds come in. You see, what all creeds do, and the Apostles' Creed in particular, is tell us the main facts about our faith. Those facts—I call them faith facts—are important because they tell us not only what is true in our faith but what are the most important truths of our faith. While Christian beliefs can be diverse—certain matters remain contentious, some topics are up for negotiation—other beliefs need to be rigorously defended, and this is where the Apostles' Creed helps us. The Apostles' Creed tells us the main faith facts that Christians ought to believe if they are to be called Christians. What they give us, to quote detective Joe Friday, is "just the facts, ma'am."

The Main Faith Facts

If there was a fire in your house or apartment, and if you had only one minute to hastily grab a few precious belongings before the whole place was filled with smoke and engulfed in flames, do you know what you would grab? Assuming everyone was out safely, what items would you scurry to rescue before they were destroyed? How about your laptop computer (especially if your PhD thesis is on it!), tablet, smart phone,

precious photos, passport and birth certificate, the family cello, autographed copy of President Obama's book *The Audacity of Hope*, or your Alanis Morissette CD collection. I'm sure for each person it would be different, everyone having their own favorite trinkets and material attachments. The point of this illustration is that creeds kind of do the same thing. They are not an exhaustive list of all Christian beliefs, but they are either a summary of the main beliefs that we need to be a church (as in the Apostles' Creed), or else they mark out the church's teaching on big-ticket items, like who is Jesus in relation to the Father (as in the Nicene Creed), when the topic has proved to be contentious. All this is to say, metaphorically speaking, if theology were a house, the contents of the creed are the things you would quickly grab before jumping out of the window. In other words, in case of emergency, heed the creed!

Let me explain what I meant in a different way. Although all theological beliefs in some way are important, the fact is that some beliefs are more important than others. For instance, I'd say the gospel is absolutely essential, something a church must have imbibed into its soul, wisely defend, and enthusiastically proclaim, so we need consensus and consent on this subject. Whether a church should be led by a priest appointed by a bishop, governed by a council of elders, or ruled by the will of a majority in the congregation is a significant matter for the order and accountability of a church, but I don't think anybody's salvation is riding on it. And whether your English Bible should be the RSV, NIV, or CEB is a matter that I have my own preferences on, but I find it hard to get terribly excited either way. What I'm trying to say is that there is a hierarchy of beliefs,

which we could break down into three areas: core beliefs which affect salvation and comprise the bedrock of our faith; common beliefs which are in their own way important but remain disputed—churches might nail their colors to the mast on them, but we can imagine authentic Christians who do not hold to them; and convictional beliefs regarding matters which the Bible does not speak about and Christians are free to follow their own conscience to decide about them.

But what are the core beliefs, the bare essentials, the without-which-not of a true church, the doctrines that matter the most? This is where the Apostles' Creed comes in. It tells us what those core beliefs happen to be. Now we might want to add some others, but the view of the early church—and here we disregard their opinion to our own peril—as to what are the most vital teachings of Scripture are as follows:

- God the Father, the all-powerful Creator.
- Jesus Christ as God's Son and the Lord of the universe.
- The story of Jesus from birth to his ascension and session.
- The impending return of Jesus to judge the world.
- The person and work of the Holy Spirit.
- The church as God's holy and global people.
- God's saving work epitomized in the forgiveness of sins.
- Life in God's new world through the resurrection of the dead.

I think you have to admit that that is a pretty good list, particularly because it forces us to think more deeply about some of these areas, especially the story of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins, etc., and they prove to be a

big enough box that much can be unpacked later. It is the verdict of the ancient church, a verdict which has met with concurrence across much of church history, that those are the main faith facts that we should be concerned to articulate, defend, and teach.

Universal Faith Facts

Often when you buy something, like tickets to a football game or a particular product from a well-known retailer, you'll find a symbol indicating its authenticity. That way you know that you've purchased the bona fide product and not a cheap rip-off or clever imitation. For example, if you see a guy downtown selling smart phones out of the back of his van, and the phones are called "iPhone" by "Appel," then you can safely bet that you are dealing with a dodgy product from a dodgy dealer. You won't find the authenticating mark of Apple Inc. on any of his merchandise.

In the same way, the creeds function as an authentication code to help distinguish between a true and false church. So if a church reads, recites, and teaches the Apostles' Creed, or the Nicene Creed, or the Athanasian Creed, then that is a good first bit of proof that the church in question is authentically Christian, doctrinally kosher, theologically legit, and genuinely orthodox. Now that said, there might be some other things that a church believes or does that might make them dubious on faith and practice. The Apostles' Creed does not filter out all heresies or guard against every possible kind of doctrinal aberration or unwholesome practice. That caveat aside, the presence of the Apostles' Creed in their statement of faith can be regarded as a

first green light that identifies a church and its members with the faith of the Scriptures and the testimony of the historical church. So it is a good place to start.

I imagine that some of you might be wondering why it matters what anyone else, contemporary or ancient, believes about God; surely it only matters what doctrines we find in Scripture from our own study and dare to affirm within the precincts of our own consciences. That sounds well and good, but only if you suffer from historical ignorance about church history, theological narcissism as to your own importance, and ecclesiological solipsism to the effect that only your fellowship exists or matters. I want to contend that as God's people, the church of Jesus Christ, we claim to stand in continuity with the apostles and in communion with those who have kept the apostolic faith and have walked in the footsteps of Jesus ahead of us. Christian beliefs are, then, not a matter of innovation or speculation but about retrieval and reformation, constantly bringing ourselves back to a faith that is biblical and catholic. By "catholic" I don't mean the Roman Catholic church; rather, I mean those beliefs that are shared by all wings of the church be they Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant—what C. S. Lewis called "Mere Christianity" and what Thomas Oden has labelled "Consensual Christianity." This refers to an agreeable doctrinal unity on the beliefs that matter the most, something that the creeds like the Apostles' Creed do for us. Whatever differences there are among the various churches, and they are real and not always insignificant, yet there is a shared consensus on at least some things by all true and faithful Christians. So, yes, we need to be good Bereans and, assessing

all things according to the standards of Scripture, we must be open and prepared to see what new light God has to shine on his word and, like Paul, we must “test all things and hold onto that which is good” (1 Thess 5:21). Yet the essentials of our faith, born of deep wrestling with Scripture, forged in prayer, clung to in times of persecution, heralded to the ends of the earth, and shared by all wings of the church throughout the world, pertains to the things that we find in the Apostles’ Creed. So if we want to affirm that the Christian faith is not just my faith but our faith, transcending tribe, race, language, culture, and denominations, then we would be wise to affirm a version of the faith that has stood the test of time and demonstrated its robust strength time and time again.

To put it simply: The Apostles’ Creed is one of the best authentication marks for identifying a church that consciously and deliberately identifies with the faith of the Christian churches across the ages and throughout the world.

A Syllabus for Discipleship

One of the best uses of the Apostles’ Creed is that it comprises probably the oldest syllabus of Christian doctrine that there is. Theologians from Augustine to John Calvin to Karl Barth have used the Apostles’ Creed as a miniature seminary for teaching the basics of the faith to young believers. While I teach several courses on theology at my own institution, Ridley College, I have a special course called “Foundational Christian Beliefs” for those students who are only taking one semester of theology across the duration of their degree, and that course is deliberately based on the Apostles’ Creed because it is such a

great outline for those wanting a crash course on Christian beliefs. Each line of the creed is basically a doctrinal coat hanger from which several derivative beliefs neatly hang. It is then the responsibility of a good instructor or preacher to get those derivative beliefs off the hook and show and tell them to the audience about what Christians believe and why.

Something I've argued at length in my book *Evangelical Theology* is that theology is really about expounding the gospel at theological depth. Theology is really about explaining who is the God of the gospel, the person and work of Jesus proclaimed in the gospel, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church as promised to us in the gospel, plus all the implications and corollaries that go with them. If one is interested in expounding a gospel-centered theology, then I have to say that the Apostles' Creed is definitely a great way to approach that task, beginning as it does with God, moving through several key areas, until finishing with the resurrection and eternal life. While there are undoubtedly other ways of explaining theology—I'm not disputing that—the Apostles' Creed is an ancient and trusted way of going about an important task of teaching people in the way of Jesus Christ.

Defiance in the Face of Empire

Let me add that there is something inherently subversive and even countercultural when we recite the Apostles' Creed. When we say "I believe ...," we are not only acknowledging that this is the religion that we believe to be true, but much more than that, we are claiming that this creed tells a story about God, his Son, and the whole world. What is more, in professing "I believe" we

are also affirming that we are caught up in this story, we are captured by its majestic vision of God's love, we are inspired by this story, our deepest hopes are fulfilled in this story, and we are defined by this story and not by any other story . To say, "I believe in God the Father ... in Jesus Christ ... in the Holy Spirit ... in the holy catholic church" is to affirm this story and to spurn all other narratives that try to command our allegiance and obedience. To recite the creed is to affirm the faith and to reject all other religions, ideologies, worldviews, and competing perspectives.

I want to stress that in the West, where Christianity is receding as the default setting in society, affirming the Christian faith is becoming a deeply subversive gesture. Politicians, social activists, professors, bureaucrats, comedians, and TV talk-show hosts frequently deride Christians for their beliefs because they are not palatable to the spirit of the age. Thus, from time to time, we are criticized for being dogmatic, or else told to get with the program and change our views. Sadly, in a post-Christian or anti-Christian context, some churches and theologians suffer from the theological equivalent of Stockholm Syndrome, where they begin to identify with the values of their cultural captors and tinker with Christian beliefs to make them more palatable to the pundits and pop icons of their day. The problem is that if Jesus wanted us all to be popular, he would have told us all to become ice cream vendors. The church that panders at the pool of popularity will eventually betray the common convictions, even the gospel, that birthed it and nourished it from infancy to maturity. It will dispute and then mock the basic building blocks of the faith and effectively

jackhammer the very foundations the church was built upon. Forgive me if this sounds too polemical. I wish it didn't, but experience has made me cynical, and I'm just reading the writing on the wall in front of me. I want to suggest that in the post-Christian West—caught as it is between a rise in militant Islam and secular fundamentalism in many places, where churches are struggling to remain orthodox in a pluralistic age permeated with materialist ideologies—professing the Apostles' Creed is not an expression of interior religious convictions but is an act of outright defiance. My creed is my refusal to bow down to the ideologues of this age, who arrogantly think that they have the authority to command my allegiance, to elicit my devotion, and to control my conscience. My creed is my way of saying that I cannot be bought off, threatened, tempted, or intimidated into denying anything that my mothers and fathers in the faith have taught me from Scripture. My creed is my defiance to a world that oscillates between the poles of godlessness and idolatry. My creed is my way of saying that no matter what others may say about me or do to me, I know that God loves me, Christ died for me, the Spirit is with me, and I will enjoy eternity with my Lord and Savior. My creed is my resistance to the kingdoms of this world and my passport proving that I belong to the kingdom of God.