

The Apostles' Creed

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

I Believe in God

Scripture

Genesis 1:1–5; Psalm 19:1–6

Main Idea

The Apostles' Creed proclaims that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of Jesus Christ is a loving parent, sovereign ruler, and life-giving creator of the world.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. Why Christians use the Apostles' Creed and other creeds to “confess” their faith
2. How the description of God as “almighty”—the one who can do all things—is qualified by the belief in a personal God whom we know in the intimate relationship of a child to a parent
3. Our responsibility to be stewards, protecting and preserving God's good creation

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers

Bare wall or bulletin board and tape or pushpins to create a “We Believe” graffiti wall

Paper, scissors, old magazines and newspapers, pens, pencils, markers

Hymnals with the hymn “I Sing the Mighty Power of God” (*Glory to God*, #32; *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #288)

LEADER PREP

Prepare for leading each session by reading the participant's book and highlighting important points. Read and reflect on the Scripture passages for this session.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the Introduction to this study as well as the material in Session 1 (participant's book, pp. 4–12). Be prepared to give an overview of this study. Have available Bibles, newsprint, and markers. Think about how you would answer the Questions for Reflection (participant's book, p. 12) so you can help the small groups engage with the questions. Write "We Believe" in large letters on a sheet of paper and post it on the wall or bulletin board to begin a graffiti wall. Post on the graffiti wall the names "God," "Jesus Christ," and "Holy Spirit" and one or more blank sheets of newsprint on which participants may write questions and beliefs with which they struggle. Have available paper, markers, old newspapers and magazines, and other supplies for participants to use throughout the study to confess their faith in words and images.

For Heart, have available hymnals, paper, and pens or markers. Familiarize yourself with the hymn "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" so you can help participants name examples of God as both almighty creator and caring parent. Spend some time reflecting on the three affirmations about God, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (participant's book, p. 12), so you can help participants engage with the activity.

For Hands, have available Bibles. Be prepared to help participants understand that beliefs lead to action—and particularly that belief in God should lead to stewardship of God's good creation. Allow time for participants to post affirmations, questions, and related images on the "We Believe" graffiti wall.

For Depart, arrange to have an accompanist or choir member to lead in singing "I Sing the Mighty Power of God." Plan to incorporate participants' prayers and/or affirmations into your closing prayer time.

Leading the Session

Gather

- Light the Christ candle.
- Say together the Apostles' Creed (participant's book, p. 5). Invite participants to introduce themselves and share a phrase in the creed that stands out to them.
- Read Genesis 1:1–5.
- Pray together the prayer at the beginning of Session 1 (participant's book, p. 7).

Head

- Call attention to the “We Believe” graffiti wall, explaining that this will be a way for participants to use words and images to confess their faith throughout this study.
- Review the introduction to this study and the introduction to Session 1 (participant's book, pp. 4, 7–8). Note the history of the Apostles' Creed and how it was used in the early church in the context of baptism. Ask: *How do we use the Apostles' Creed today? What does it mean to “confess” our faith? How does using a creed or confession help us to grow in faith?*
- On a sheet of newsprint write “Faith seeking understanding.” Ask: *What does this phrase mean?* Note that the goal of this study is to move toward deeper understanding of the faith we confess, which sometimes involves wrestling with difficult questions. Post the phrase on the graffiti wall above the blank sheets of newsprint for participants' questions. Tell them this is a space to express doubts and issues they want to explore further.
- Look together at the Apostles' Creed (participant's book, p. 5), noting its Trinitarian structure. Ask: *Does anything in the section about God raise questions or make you uncomfortable?* Invite participants to write these on the newsprint under “Faith seeking understanding.”
- Note that the Questions for Reflection (participant's book, p. 12) invite exploration of issues some have found troubling: God as “Father,” “almighty,” and “creator.” Divide participants into three groups and assign each group one of the questions to discuss. (Or let participants self-select according to which concept they want to wrestle with more deeply.) Give each group newsprint and markers. Have them read relevant Scripture passages and material from the participant's book and express in their own words an affirmation about God. Have someone from each group share the group's affirmation and highlights of the discussion.

Heart

- Distribute hymnals and look together at the words of the hymn “I Sing the Mighty Power of God.” Ask: *What examples of God’s power are given? What words or phrases suggest a caring and more personal God, known in the intimate relationship of a child to a parent?*
- Distribute paper and pens or markers. Invite participants to reflect silently on a phrase from the hymn or on one of the three descriptions of God, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (participant’s book, p. 12). Suggest they draw or write a response, perhaps in the form of a prayer or affirmation of faith for the graffiti wall. Encourage participants to use the Spiritual Practice in the coming week.

Hands

- Distribute Bibles and look together at Genesis 1. Ask: *What refrain is repeated after each act of creation? What does it mean that God’s creation is “very good”? What is our responsibility as stewards of creation?* Read aloud the last paragraph in Session 1 (participant’s book, pp. 11–12).
- Explain that for Christians, each “We believe” statement implies a “therefore.” Faith leads to action. Divide participants into small groups to draft one or more “therefore” statements in response to our beliefs about God. Suggest they think about things to do both as individuals and as a congregation. Have someone from each group report on the discussion.
- Invite participants to post on the graffiti wall, around the “God” heading, affirmations of belief and “therefore” statements developed during this session. They may want to add images (drawn or cut from magazines).

Depart

- Light the Christ candle.
- Read Psalm 19:1–6.
- Sing together “I Sing the Mighty Power of God.”
- Close with prayer, inviting participants to share prayers or affirmations written during the session.

The Apostles' Creed

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I Believe in God

Scripture

Genesis 1:1–5 God creates the heavens and the earth.

Psalm 19:1–6 Heaven and earth tell the glory of God.

Prayer

O God, we praise you. We bless your name for being the creator of all things. The glorious universe reflects your goodness. All things are the work of your hands. And so are we. For creating us as living persons who can praise and serve you, we give you our deepest thanks. You support our needs as a parent, bless our days with love, and call us to glorify you. May we be your faithful people, praising our creator, and caring for your creation. You have made us for yourself; help us to live for you. Amen.

Introduction

The Apostles' Creed is the best known and most widely used creed in Western churches. It began as a basic creed for those who were to be baptized. An early summary of Christian belief became known as “the rule of faith.” It was to offer an outline or compendium of Christian teachings so people could understand what they believed.

From the second to the ninth centuries, the basics of Christian belief began to be expressed in the context of Christian baptism. When candidates presented themselves for baptism, they were asked: “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?” They answered, “I believe.” Then followed questions about Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The baptism administered was for the forgiveness of sins and entrance into the church, the body of Jesus Christ. At the end of their training or catechetical period, candidates for baptism recited what they were going to confess before the gathered community of faith.

Over time—and by the ninth century—what became known as the Apostles' Creed developed. Though it had evolved through the centuries, it still expressed the basic faith of early Christians.

Over the following centuries, until today, Christian faith has continued to hold to basic theological beliefs. The church has developed understandings of the individual parts of the Apostles' Creed that explain much more fully and in detailed ways the meanings and implications of the clauses of the creed. This is part of the church's ongoing commitment to "faith seeking understanding." We begin in simple faith: I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit. Then we move on to study the Scriptures, reflect in prayer and meditation, discuss, and articulate our further understandings of the meaning of what we believe. This is the impetus and direction of confessing our Christian faith. We want to know and understand more fully the nature of the faith we profess in baptism and the faith we confess when we become part of the church of Jesus Christ. Our study of the Apostles' Creed is a further step along our journey of faith.

I Believe in God the Father

The Apostles' Creed has three "articles" corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Its language is reminiscent of Scripture phrases and descriptions of important biblical topics.

The first words of the creed—"I believe in God the Father"—assert what is by no means obvious about what people may mean when they say they believe in "God." The idea of "God" can take many forms, and through the centuries, philosophers as well as ordinary people have asserted many ideas about "God." They have defined "God" in many ways. Some have spoken of "gods"—many beings. Some believe "God" is the name for the impersonal power of the universe that may also be called "the laws of nature" or even "The Force." Some have believed "God" is the idea for the "values" people hold—like it is better to be loving than hateful. Ideas about "God" abound!

The creed asserts what the Bible teaches: that God is personal. The God we believe in and confess—based on the biblical Scriptures—is a personal God who relates to humans as a parent to a child. The God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament is a personal God. The nation of Israel believed God dealt with them in highly personal terms. The psalmist proclaimed, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). The prophet Isaiah believed

God was saying to the people of Israel: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isaiah 66:13). The nation and its people may sin against this God. Throughout, they found God dealt with them in highly personal terms.

“Father” is the name Jesus used to describe the God he proclaimed. Most memorably, Jesus instructed his disciples in what we call the Lord’s Prayer: “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9). Prayer itself assumes one is praying to another who will “hear” and for whom one’s prayer is meaningful. This is supremely what Jesus came to communicate about God. The term “Father” does not mean God is male; it is an expression of the personal, parental relationship Jesus proclaims it is possible to have with God.

The term “Father” does not mean God is male; it is an expression of the personal, parental relationship Jesus proclaims it is possible to have with God.

Our relationship with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the God of Jesus Christ is with a personal, loving “parent” who created us, sustains us, and who loves and forgives us. We are united to God through faith in Jesus Christ who lived and died and was raised from the dead to establish this loving relationship now and forever.

We confess we believe in the personal God who, as the creed affirms, is the God we know in three persons. At its core, we realize our relationship with God means we are never alone. As A Brief Statement of Faith puts it: “In life and in death we belong to God.”¹

Almighty

The term “almighty” is a further description of the God who is confessed as “Father.” This term may make us a bit uneasy. In today’s context, we may be wary of terms that connote “might” or great power. We know that “power” in the wrong hands is eminently dangerous. In a world “on edge” because of the threat posed by nuclear weapons, we fear that unlimited power could lead to the extinction of the whole world. We know the expression “might makes right.” “Might” that is sheer power to do whatever the powerful entity desires—that is worrisome to the highest degree!

1. *Book of Confessions*, Part 1 of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, (Louisville: Office of The General Assembly, 2016), 11.1.

But we recognize that in the creed, the God we believe in who is “almighty”—is the God who is our “Father,” our divine parent. This personal God qualifies whatever “almighty” may mean. “Almighty” does not mean God has a “bigger hammer” than anyone else. It means the personal God we know in the intimate relationship of a child to a parent is also the one who can do all things, who is “Lord”—as the Scriptures say; or, in the language of our Reformed and Presbyterian theological tradition: God is sovereign.

The term “almighty” (Greek *pantokratōr*; Latin *omnipotens*) is better translated in line with the creed’s earliest meanings as “all-ruling,” or “all-sovereign.” God is the one who is “over all” and who rules the world and all people. This is the Hebrew Bible sense of God *almighty* (*’El shaddai*) as when “the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless’” (Genesis 17:1). We live before God. This is also the God who blesses: “The Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep” (Genesis 49:25). God establishes life. Elihu proclaimed to Job: “The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4).

We find “God the Almighty” is the God who creates, who rules, who blesses and—says the creed—this is “God the Father Almighty.” It is the character of God as the divine parent—of all creation and all people—who brings forth life, rules, exercises power, and blesses people. God’s “power” is governed by God’s character; and God’s character is expressed in the exercise of God’s power.

God is sovereign, almighty. But this sovereignty conveys who God is. “God is love,” says 1 John (4:8, 16). God’s “almightiness” is enacted in ways of love in this world. God’s power is the power of love, which will be “the last word” in human history and beyond. In the great vision of the end of history and God’s eternal reign, the great multitude proclaim: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns” (Revelation 19:6).

*“God is love,” says
1 John (4:8, 16).*

We sing the mighty power of God and the goodness of the Lord. God’s power and God’s goodness celebrate the God we can trust to be “almighty” in loving ways.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

The opening words of the Bible show God as creator of all: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth”

(Genesis 1:1). This is recognized in the first sentence of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. God is "maker of heaven and earth." This is a comprehensive claim embracing all reality.

The church affirms God is creator of all and that God created *ex nihilo*. This little Latin phrase means "out of nothing." God creates by the divine word and power. God's word brings all things into existence by its own power. God did not look around for anything already in existence and say, "I think I'll use these materials to create the heavens and the earth!" This would imply something was already created when God decided to create. This would point to something "prior" to God. But in Scripture, God is eternal and all that exists in the whole cosmos exists because of God's word and will.

Christians affirm God is creator of all. John Calvin called the creation "this most beautiful theater."² We experience this for ourselves as we gaze upon creation today. As Calvin put it, "Wherever we cast our eyes, all things they meet are works of God."³ We should realize this when we look around us—this is a work of God the creator. It is easy with our busy, technological lives to pass by the creation around us, scarcely giving it a thought because we are focused on other things. But we should slow down, "slow down and appreciate life"—as they say; to recognize and praise with the psalmist: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

God alone is creator of all, the "maker of heaven and earth." As we recognize this, we should remember the refrain in Genesis. After the various acts of creating, God looked upon them and "God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:12, 18, 21, 25). This was God's verdict about the whole creation itself: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). "In sovereign love," says A Brief Statement of Faith, "God created the world good."⁴ The good God is "maker of heaven and earth"—a very good creation!

Calvin said that while we should recognize all things around us as the works of God, "at the same time," we should "ponder with pious meditation to what end God created them."⁵ What are the

*The good God is maker
of a very good creation!*

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1.14.20.

3. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.20.

4. *Book of Confessions*, 11.3.

5. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.14.20.

divine purposes of “the good creation”? What are God’s purposes for us—part of the creation, too? As we ponder them and how we should live in relation to them, surely most basic is that we should receive the creation with gratitude and work to be good “stewards” of creation—to protect and preserve creation. This is a theological mandate. It is our most essential activity in relation to the good world God has given us. We have responsibilities to tend the creation and keep it well for posterity—because creation is God’s divine gift to us!

Spiritual Practice

Meditate in turn on the three terms of this clause of the creed: Father, Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. Do this in three different locations, such as: in nature, on a street in a city or town, in a church or other places. Ask: What does this mean for my life each day?

Questions for Reflection

Why is it important to recognize “Father” as a term of parental relationship and intimacy rather than as a literal description?

With so many expressions of “power” in the world, what makes God as “almighty” distinct and different? What is the implication of God’s “power” being revealed in the cross of Christ? (1 Corinthians 1:18–25).

In what ways can belief in God the “maker of heaven and earth” be reconciled with the findings of contemporary science?