

The Apostles' Creed

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I Believe in God

Scripture

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

Psalms 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.

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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).

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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

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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?