

Praise for *The Apostles' Creed*

Ben Myers has given readers a precious gift in this short series of meditations on the Apostles' Creed. Like the Church Fathers whose work permeates this book, he treats us to a series of pithy, pertinent reflections that demonstrate theological depth—yet with a surprisingly light touch. Tackling hard matters like gender and God's fatherhood, the virginal conception, the descent into hell, and the persons of the divine Trinity, Myers is alive to both the richness of Christian tradition and the needs of the hour. This is popular theology in the best sense of that term, making accessible the great truths of the Christian faith.

Oliver D. Crisp
Fuller Theological Seminary,
author of *Saving Calvinism*

Like the Creed, this gem of a book answers the question, "What do Christians believe?" But because it is sensitive to the unique doubts and fears and cynicism of the 21st century, it winsomely answers the question behind that question: "How could Christians possibly believe that?" Myers shows as much as he tells, introducing us to the audacious wisdom of ancient voices whose insights prove timely and perennial. This is the catechesis we need for a secular age, overcoming the forgetting we parade as enlightenment.

James K. A. Smith
Calvin College,
author of *You Are What You Love* and *Awaiting the King*

Ben Myers has written a simple and yet incredibly elegant and sublime account of the Christian faith according to the Apostles' Creed. Myers works through the creed, word by word, phrase by phrase, and explains its meaning afresh in a way that is both memorable and meditative. Drawing on Scripture and the wisdom of church history, Myers teaches us what it means to confess "I believe."

Michael F. Bird
Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia,
author of *What Christians Ought to Believe*

I am very thankful to Ben Myers for his concise, readable commentary on the Apostles' Creed! He joins the refreshing movement that is retrieving the church's long and well-established theological consensus and urging the contemporary church to embrace this wisdom from the past. I am particularly struck by Ben's words: "The truest and most important things we can ever say are not individual words but communal words." His book helps today's church confess the Apostles' Creed as essential truth about the triune God and the salvation he offers.

Gregg R. Allison
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,
author of *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*



THE APOSTLES' CREED

A Guide to the Ancient Catechism

BEN MYERS


LEXHAM PRESS

CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS





The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism
Christian Essentials

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CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS



SERIES PREFACE



The Christian Essentials series passes down tradition that matters.

The church has often spoken paradoxically about growth in Christian faith: to grow means to stay at the beginning. The great Reformer Martin Luther exemplified this. “Although I’m indeed an old doctor,” he said, “I never move on from the childish doctrine of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. I still daily learn and pray them with my little Hans and my little Lena.” He had just as much to learn about the Lord as his children.

The ancient church was founded on basic biblical teachings and practices like the Ten Commandments, baptism, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Prayer, and corporate worship. These basics of the Christian life have sustained and nurtured every generation of the faithful—from the apostles to today. They apply equally to old and young, men and

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women, pastors and church members. “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith” (Gal 3:26).

We need the wisdom of the communion of saints. They broaden our perspective beyond our current culture and time. “Every age has its own outlook,” C. S. Lewis wrote. “It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes.” By focusing on what’s current, we rob ourselves of the insights and questions of those who have gone before us. On the other hand, by reading our forebears in faith, we engage ideas that otherwise might never occur to us.

The books in the Christian Essentials series open up the meaning of the foundations of our faith. These basics are unfolded afresh for today in conversation with the great tradition—grounded in and strengthened by Scripture—for the continuing growth of all the children of God.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY,
maker of heaven and earth,
AND 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 hell.

On the third day he rose again
from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and is seated

at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the
living 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.





PREFACE



The Christian faith is mysterious not because it is so complicated but because it is so simple. A person does not start with baptism and then advance to higher mysteries. In baptism each believer already possesses the faith in its fullness. The whole of life is encompassed in the mystery of baptism: dying with Christ and rising with him through the Spirit to the glory of God. That is how the Christian life begins, and to seek to move beyond that beginning is really to regress. In discipleship, the one who makes the most progress is the one who remains at the beginning. And that is where theological thinking comes in handy. Theology does not have all the right answers, but it can help us to contemplate the reality of baptism and to penetrate more deeply into its meaning for life.

That is why I wrote this book. Not because anyone needs to be told what to believe but because Christ's followers have everything they need already. "All things are yours," says Paul:

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“all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor 3:21–23). We are not beggars hoping for scraps. We are like people who have inherited a vast estate: we have to study the documents and visit different locations because it’s more than we can take in at a single glance. In the same way, it takes considerable time and effort to begin to comprehend all that we have received in Christ. Theological thinking does not add a single thing to what we have received. The inheritance remains the same whether we grasp its magnitude or not. But the better we grasp it, the happier we are.

So this small book is an invitation to happiness. I have written it with a glad heart, and I hope it will be helpful for others who want to comprehend the mystery of faith in all its “breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18–19).

The book began life as a series of sermons on the creed at Leichhardt Uniting Church in Sydney. I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. John Hirt and to the Leichhardt congregation for their friendship and hospitality on that occasion. To them this book is affectionately dedicated. The sermons were long, and the book is short. In both cases I take comfort from the words of Irenaeus: “Since the faith is one and the same, the one who says much about it does not add to it, nor does the one who says little diminish it.”¹



INTRODUCTION

The Ancient Catechism



On the eve of Easter Sunday, a group of believers has stayed up all night in a vigil of prayer, scriptural reading, and instruction. The most important moment of their lives is fast approaching. For years they have been preparing for this day.

When the rooster crows at dawn, they are led out to a pool of flowing water. They remove their clothes. The women let down their hair and remove their jewelry. They renounce Satan and are anointed from head to foot with oil. They are led naked into the water. Then they are asked a question: “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?” They reply, “I believe!” And they are plunged down in the water and raised up again.

They are asked a second question: “Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the virgin and was crucified under Pontius Pilate and

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was dead and buried and rose on the third day alive from the dead and ascended in the heavens and sits at the right hand of the Father and will come to judge the living and the dead?" Again they confess, "I believe!" And again they are immersed in the water.

Then a third question: "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy church and the resurrection of the flesh?" A third time they cry, "I believe!" And a third time they are immersed. When they emerge from the water they are again anointed with oil. They are clothed, blessed, and led into the assembly of believers, where they will share for the first time in the eucharistic meal. Finally they are sent out into the world to do good works and to grow in faith.

That is how baptism is described in an early third-century document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*.² It points to the ancient roots of the Apostles' Creed. The creed comes from baptism. It is a pledge of allegiance to the God of the gospel—a God who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a God who is present to us in the real world of human flesh, creating, redeeming, and sanctifying us for good works.

It is often said that creeds are political documents, the cunning invention of bishops and councils who are trying to enforce their own understanding of orthodoxy. In the case of the Apostles' Creed, nothing could be further from the truth. It was not created by a council. It was not part of any deliberate theological strategy. It was a grassroots confession of faith. It was an indigenous form of the ancient church's response to

the risen Christ, who commanded his apostles to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19–20). The Nicene Creed is a different matter, since it was formulated by two church councils in the fourth century. But even that creed is essentially an enlargement and clarification of the ancient baptismal confession.

Later generations of believers sometimes said that each of the twelve apostles had written one line of the creed—hence the name “Apostles’ Creed.” It is a charming legend that conveys a deep truth: that the baptismal confession is rooted in the faith of the apostles, and ultimately in the word of the risen Christ himself.

By the second century, the basic form of the creed can be found in widely dispersed Christian communities. Irenaeus, a pastor in second-century Gaul, speaks of a threefold “rule” or “canon” that defines the faith of all Christians throughout the world:

The church, indeed, though disseminated throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God the Father Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in the one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was enfleshed for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets preached the economies. ... The church ...

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carefully guards this preaching and this faith which she has received, as if she dwelt in one house. She likewise believes these things as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart. She preaches, teaches, and hands them down harmoniously, as if she possessed but one mouth. For though the languages throughout the world are different, nevertheless the meaning of the tradition is one and the same.³

This rule of faith had two functions. First, it was educational. It formed the basis of catechesis for new believers. In the period of preparation for baptism, new adherents to the Christian faith would memorize the creedal formula and would receive instruction in its meaning. The threefold confession of faith was to be written on the heart so that it could never be lost or forgotten. That way, all believers would have a basic guide to the interpretation of Scripture, and even illiterate believers would be able to retain the substance of the biblical story. They would see Scripture as a unified witness to one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And they would see the created world as the domain of God's activity: God creates our world, becomes incarnate in it, and will ultimately redeem it fully in the resurrection of the dead. That is how the Christian mind was formed by the ancient catechism.

Second, the rule of faith was sacramental. It was not only used as a catechism in preparation for baptism but was also part of the baptismal rite itself. A person becomes a disciple

of Jesus and a member of his community by making the threefold pledge of allegiance. Baptism is a threefold immersion into the life of God. “The baptism of our regeneration takes place through these three articles, granting us regeneration unto God the Father through his Son by the Holy Spirit.”⁴ The creedal words are words of power. They are words that perform: like naming a yacht, or making a bet, or speaking a marriage vow. In baptism, something is brought into being as the words are spoken. It is the words, just as much as the water, that make a baptism. By these words a person becomes a disciple of Jesus and a member of his community.

So the creed is both informative and performative,⁵ both educational and sacramental. It is a summary of Christian teaching as well as a solemn pledge of allegiance. These two functions of the creed can be distinguished but not separated. Catechesis is necessary so that we can make the baptismal declaration with understanding and with genuine commitment. And in turn the baptismal confession orders our thinking about God and the world.

Even today the creed provides a framework—strong yet surprisingly flexible—for Christian thinking and Christian commitment.



ARTICLE I

**I BELIEVE IN GOD
THE FATHER ALMIGHTY,**

maker of heaven and earth.



“ | ”



he first word is perhaps the strangest part of the whole Apostles' Creed: "I." Who is this I? Whose voice is speaking in the creed?

I have been to wedding ceremonies where the couple write their own vows. It is a recent custom that reflects wider cultural changes. In the past, one of the things that made a wedding special was the fact that you got to say exactly the same words that everybody else said. When a couple said their vows, they weren't just expressing their own feelings. They didn't use their own words; they used the same words that their parents and their ancestors had spoken, and they made those words their own.

But today we are skeptical about the past. We are skeptical about anything that is merely handed down to us. We assume that the truest thing we could ever say would be something we had made up ourselves.

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In the same way, Christians today are often suspicious of creeds. Many churches are more comfortable with mission statements than with creeds. The thing about a mission statement is you always get to make it up for yourself. It's like writing your own wedding vows.

But here's the paradox. It is the individualized confession, like the personalized wedding vow, that ends up sounding like an echo of the wider society. What could be more conformist than expressing your feelings of love through your own specially crafted wedding vow? The wedding is a grand occasion, so you want to make it special: but the more you try to personalize it, the more it degenerates into triviality and cliché. The ceremonial quality evaporates. Or again, what could be more conformist than a mission statement? Every company has one. And although each one is unique, they all sound eerily similar, as if all the companies in the world were out to achieve the same blandly generic aims. I think there is a similar dynamic at work in many churches today. The harder they try to be special and unique, the more they seem exactly like everybody else.

By contrast, to confess the creed is to take up a countercultural stance. When we say the creed we are not just expressing our own views or our own priorities. We are joining our voices to a great communal voice that calls out across the centuries from every tribe and tongue. We locate ourselves as part of that community that transcends time and place. That gives us a critical distance from our own time and place. If our voices

are still echoes, they are now echoing something from beyond our own cultural moment.

“I believe.” Who is the “I” that speaks when we make that confession? It is the body of Christ. It is a community stretched out across history, “terrible as an army with banners” (Song 6:10). The whole company of Christ’s followers goes down into the waters of baptism, crying out the threefold “I believe!” In baptism nobody is invited to come up with their own personal statement of belief. All are invited to be immersed into a reality beyond themselves and to join their individual voices to a communal voice that transcends them all.

The truest and most important things we can ever say are not individual words but communal words. Most of the words of my life are trivial and fleeting. They fall from my lips and drift away like dead leaves. But in the creed I am invited to say true words. In confessing the faith of the church, I allow my own individual “I” to become part of the “I” of the body of Christ.

It is then that I am saying something of deep and lasting importance. It is then that my words have roots.