



This We Believe!

MEDITATIONS ON THE APOSTLES' CREED

Timothy C. Tennent

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Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth,

I believe in Jesus Christ, His 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 to the dead.

The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there, He shall come 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.

Introduction

One of the great privileges of serving as the President of Asbury Theological Seminary is traveling across the country meeting our alumni and friends. I meet hundreds of people every year. During the last two years I have seen how hungry God's people are to be taught the Word of God and to know the central teachings of the Christian faith. Throughout history the people of God have wanted clear summaries of the faith so that they could be clear on the essential truths of Christianity. Known as catechesis manuals, these were then used to develop spiritual training guides for children and new believers. The word catechesis is the same root from which we get our modern word echo. The idea is that we pass on the faith, and those who receive it would echo it, meaning that they would be able to say it back to us just as they heard it. Thus, the word catechesis simultaneously reinforces twin truths: the sacredness of the Apostolic message and a warning against those who are tempted to reconstruct the faith to conform to modern sentiments or the latest cultural wind.

These early training guides were often based on summary passages such as the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and the Apostles'

Creed. In fact, throughout the history of the Church, Christians have recognized that there is no better summary of the Christian faith than the Apostles' Creed. For many centuries the Church has used the Apostles' Creed as a basic guide to instruct believers in the faith. Likewise, millions of parents and grandparents across the world have used the Apostles' Creed as the basic guide for instructing their children and grandchildren in the faith.

These devotionals are dedicated to exploring the Apostles' Creed, which contains the twelve most basic affirmations of the Christian faith. If you read these carefully, you will be renewed in your own faith and be better equipped to share your faith with your friends and neighbors. You will also be able to more effectively teach the faith to others.

One of the wonderful features of the Apostles' Creed is that it only uses language taken directly from the Scriptures. Therefore, I am including beneath every phrase some suggested readings. This feature enables the book to be used for personal devotion, as well as in small study groups or Sunday school, since I have received letters from many of you that my annual devotional books are being used in those settings. Also, as with my two previous devotional books, *Word Made Flesh* and *Christ the Fulfillment*, each chapter concludes with a verse written by Julie Tennent that is brought together as a full hymn at the end of the book. The hymn reminds us that all learning and growth in the Christian faith should ultimately lead us to worship.

A creed is a historic statement of Christian faith. The purpose of a creed is to give a brief, clear summary of the Christian faith. There are two

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creeds in the history of the Church that have been accepted by virtually all Christians everywhere. These two creeds are known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Apostle's Creed is the shorter and older of the two. The Apostles' Creed was not actually written by the twelve Apostles, but it is based on a very early version known as the Roman Symbol or Roman Creed that dates back to the second century. It is called the Apostles' Creed because it reflects the faith of the Apostles and is organized into twelve statements for each of the twelve disciples. An old tradition says that each Apostle contributed one of the affirmations of the Apostolic faith. Later, these twelve affirmations were brought together to form what we now know as the Apostles' Creed.

The twelve statements are:

1. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,
2. and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
3. who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
4. suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died and was buried.
5. He descended to the dead.
6. The third day He rose again from the dead.
7. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
8. From there, He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

9. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
10. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
11. the forgiveness of sins,
12. the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Even though the Apostles didn't actually write this creed, it clearly reflects the faith of the Apostles. From ancient times, this creed (and the Roman Creed that preceded it) was used to instruct new believers before their baptism at Easter. On Easter Sunday the Church lined up the people who had gone through a period of spiritual training and would have them publicly confess their faith, just as we do today. The twelve statements were asked as questions. For example, the leader asked, "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? Do you believe that He is the creator of the heavens and the earth?" The candidates replied, "Yes, this we believe." Then, the leader went to the next question, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His Only begotten Son, as your Lord?" The candidates again replied, "Yes, this we believe." This continued through all twelve affirmations, and only then were the candidates baptized as Christians.

For this reason, I have named this devotional, *This We Believe!* I want us to remember the faith of the Apostles and be renewed in our own faith as Christians. John Wesley was a master in discipling new believers. The reason we were originally called "Methodists" is because Wesley was so well known for having a particular *method* for training new believers. His method was a

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unique combination of small group formation, personal accountability, worship and doctrinal learning. We are grateful that John Wesley had the wisdom to include the Apostles' Creed in his own "method" for spiritual training. This is part of our heritage as Christians and as Methodists. So, let's get started!

—Timothy C. Tennent

CHAPTER ONE

I Believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth

Genesis 1:1, 49:25; Isaiah 44:6; John 1:1–3; Acts 14:15; Heb. 11:3

Notice that the entire Creed is structured around the Trinity: I believe in God the *Father* . . . and in *Jesus Christ* . . . I believe in the *Holy Spirit*. Each part of the Creed begins with each person of the Trinity and says one or more phrases about who He is in Himself and then makes a statement or two on what He has done for us. It is clear that the Creed has been very carefully planned and structured for the benefit of the Church.

However, even if we did not notice the overall Trinitarian structure, we should realize that it is a Christian affirmation with the very first phrase. If the Creed had said, “I believe in God, the Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth” it could be an Islamic creed (every Muslim could affirm that) or a Jewish creed (every Jew could affirm that). The remarkable breakthrough in the very first phrase is the affirmation that God is *Father*. The Creed opens

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with, “I believe in God, the *Father* Almighty.” It does not simply emphasize His power, His being almighty. Rather, He is first affirmed as the *Father* Almighty. We are learning something from the beginning about the nature of God. God is a father and, therefore, He cannot be fully understood as a solitary figure, but as One who is in relationship. God has intimate communion and relationship within Himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is eternally the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This also means that God can be our heavenly father. He wants to reveal Himself to us. He wants to know us. He wants us to experience His great love! Remember how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Abba, Father . . .” This is the language of intimacy. The sound or word *dada* or *daddy* is one of the first things we ever learn to say. How fitting that when we, as the children of God, are first learning to speak as Christians, we begin with our first “Christian” words, affirming God as *father*. Affirming God as *father* is the beginning “alphabet” of Christian faith. We already know with this one word that God is a person. God is not some mercurial force at the other end of the galaxy. He is not Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover” or the vague, generic god of the philosophers. He is a personal God. He is the embodiment of holiness, love, and justice.

The Creed goes on to affirm that He is almighty, meaning He is absolutely omnipotent and holds all power. This means that nothing is too difficult for God. Notice the beauty and symmetry in confessing God as both *Father* and as *Almighty*. *Fatherhood* denotes love, tenderness, nurture and protection.

Almighty denotes power, strength, authority and might. The two beautifully complement one another. God has all power, but He exercises it in a way that reveals His love and compassion for us. In our own human experience, power and authority become abusive when they are not rooted in love and compassion. Likewise, love and compassion, however sincere, can degrade into mere sentimentality if not undergirded with power and authority. In God, these attributes find perfect balance and harmony. Today, misinformed leaders will sometimes argue that we should not call God *father* because some people have had abusive fathers. They urge us to replace the word *father* with the word *creator*. However, fatherhood speaks to the very nature of God. It is who God is. The word *creator* speaks to something God does. You cannot confuse or substitute the two. One denotes personal relationship; the other communicates function. In fact, it is even more important today to recall the greatness of God as father to help provide the positive vision of fatherhood that many are lacking.

The Creed goes on to confess that God, who is both *Father* and *Almighty*, is also the creator of the heavens and the earth. Despite the language of intimacy which opens the Creed, we nevertheless realize that we are not worshipping some tribal deity who only looks after our little group. We are being brought into relationship with the Creator of the entire cosmos! The One who spoke the universe into existence now calls us by name.

It is truly wonderful that the Apostles' Creed opens with a phrase that so clearly resonates with the opening verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 shatters the

darkness by declaring, *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* The Apostles’ Creed likewise shatters our darkness by declaring that “we believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

The Apostles’ Creed is not just a doctrine to be believed; it is a truth to be celebrated. The Psalms are filled with praise to God because He is the Creator of the universe. Psalm 102:25–26 declares, *“In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain.”*

Think of the frailty and transience of our lives compared with God, the Creator. The book of James says quite soberly in James 4:14, *“What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”* James is not seeking to diminish, devalue or demoralize you or your life. However, he does want us to see ourselves in proper perspective. Compared to God’s life, our whole existence is just a little passing mist. Our entire existence is entirely dependent upon God who is the source and sustainer of all life. This is the cry of David in Psalm 8:1, *“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”* The Psalm goes on to say, *“When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him”* (8:3–4). It is truly amazing that God has taken us, lumps of clay that we are, and has lifted us up as the stewards of His glorious creation and, ultimately, to rule and reign with Him through all eternity. For Christians, to be a steward of this glorious creation goes beyond mere environmentalism. We are called to *creation care*, which is

living our entire lives in the presence of God and humbly making choices that remember that He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

For the Christian, one of the first steps in the faith is to accept by faith that God created the universe. Remember the words of Hebrews 11:3, “*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*”

In other words, we do not believe that matter is eternal. It had a beginning. God spoke it into existence through His powerful word. Now, even the modern cosmologists have mostly accepted the fact that matter is not eternal. Everything is traced to the Big Bang where, by their own admission, all the normal laws of physics completely break down. It seems clear that cosmologists can never really say much more than that about the origin of the cosmos. They might come to some intelligent design behind the Big Bang, but never “God the Father Almighty.” That is known to us only through revelation and accepted by us through faith. “*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible*” (Heb. 11:3).

This is the God of Holy Scripture. The Almighty Creator has called us to enter into a relationship with Him. My brothers and sisters, make sure your faith is set on this God who is the Lord and King of the Universe. Make certain that you are trusting in Him who spoke His Word, and the moon and stars and planets took their place in obedience to His Word. Set your faith on the Lord, the King of the Universe, who created the mountains and the streams,

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the birds of the sky, the beasts of the field, the great fish of the sea. Set your faith on the Lord, the King of the Universe, who created man and woman in His own image, breathed into us the breath of life, and called us into relationship with Himself and with one another. The Apostles' Creed calls us to see God's guiding hand and presence behind the entire created order. The Apostles' Creed reminds the Church up front, at the very doorway of faith, that God is not our personal chaplain or celestial valet who does our bidding. God is not someone we can control or shape in our own image. God is not just a divine vending machine, whereby we put in the right words of faith and we get out the promised blessings. The God of Christian proclamation is the God who is on the Throne. He is the Sovereign Lord. He is the eternal King. Praise God, He is also our heavenly father. It has never been summed up more eloquently than in Psalm 100:3, "*Know that the Lord is God. It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.*"

*I believe in God the Father, mighty yet the fount of love;
Maker of the whole creation, earth below and heav'n above.*