



THE APOSTLES' CREED AND LOYALTY TO CHRIST¹

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
And born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day He rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
And is seated at the right hand of the Father.
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.
(Modern version)

The recent publication of *Caspar Schwenckfeld: Eight Writings on Christian Belief* (Canada: Pandora Press, 2006) reveals that it can no longer be stated without qualification that Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig was opposed to creedal statements. While he opposed the proliferation of ecclesiastical creeds and confessions of faith during the Reformation era—a golden age of creed-making—he nevertheless affirmed, at least, the Apostles' Creed, for it includes the bare essentials of historic Christian orthodoxy affirmed by Christians throughout history, across different

continents, and from various schools of thought. Schwenckfeld thus set us an example for the uncertain days in which we live. We affirm its teaching not by rationalizing it away, but by receiving without mental reservation everything in it which accords with God's revealed Word. the Holy Scriptures.

The Apostles' Creed dates back to the eighth century and is, in turn, an elaboration of an Old Roman Creed dating back to the fourth century, and mentioned in its Greek version by Marcellus of Ancyra and in Latin by Rufinus (c. 400 A.D.). It found acceptance throughout the West in the medieval period and was embraced by both Roman Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The succinctness and clarity of the Apostles' Creed makes it ideal for use in new members' classes and as a means by which members of the Christian community, whether new or old, can affirm their faith in public worship, not least during an age of secular scepticism outside the church, cultural submission in the church, and religious pluralism around her.

The content of our *credo* (Latin for "I believe") may be broken down variously into twelve specific or five more general affirmations. Space only affords us room to speak more generally of the Creed's doctrines of God the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, and the Christian's hope.

FIRST AFFIRMATION: BELIEF IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

When we affirm our belief in God the Father Almighty, we profess not the Trinity's fatherly protection of humanity in general and of God's people in particular—although all that is biblical. Rather, we affirm our belief in the first person of the Godhead, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ This article, modestly edited, was written by invitation for *The Schwenkfeldian* in 2006. It followed up an earlier article (Tim J. R. Trumper, "Confessions in the School of Christ", *The Schwenkfeldian*, 106:1 [January 2006]).



We use the term “person” with discretion. In Augustine’s words, we use it not because it is (completely) ideal, but so that the truth of the Trinity may not go (wholly) unspoken. What distinguishes our everyday use of the term from its use in relation to the three subsistences of the Godhead is that the three divine persons mutually indwell each other. We call this vital idea *perichoresis* (Greek) and *circumincessio* (Latin). It explains how the one God is three persons (co-equal and co-eternal) without also being three Gods (tri-theism). It also explains why there can be no absolute division of labor in the works of the triune God. Thus, while the Creed tells us that God the Father is almighty because of His Creatorship of heaven and earth (1 Pet. 4:19)—that is, of everything outside of the Godhead—we bear in mind that all that the Father created was made through Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2–3; 11:3) and by the Holy Spirit (Gen. :2).

SECOND AFFIRMATION: OUR BELIEF IN JESUS CHRIST

We believe Jesus Christ to be the Father’s Son, the second person of the Trinity, and the Lord of his people. Here the Creed is at its most fulsome. It expresses not only the eternal aspects of Christ’s existence, but also summarizes the major facets of his earthly life and work.

By confessing that Christ was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,” we state our belief in the virgin birth, wherein the Holy Spirit formed Christ’s humanity in the womb of Mary (a nature as well as a body [cf. Heb. 10:5]). Accordingly, what was “born of the virgin Mary” was fully man while yet retaining full divinity. We observe Christ’s authentic humanity in his sufferings, crucifixion, and death under Pontius Pilate. As if to remind us that all creeds need to be double-checked against Scripture, the creed next states that Jesus Christ “descended into hell” (the traditional version). This single most debated clause is altered in the modern version, to read more accurately that Christ “descended to the dead.” We may say that, under the divine wrath of the cross, Christ went *through* hell (Matt.

27:45-46), although His words to the penitent thief remind us that after death he went to paradise rather than *to* hell (Lk. 23:43, 46). His body went to the tomb, but his Spirit returned to His Father.

The third day the Father raised Christ bodily from the grave (Acts 2:24; 1 Cor. 15:4). This resurrection was not simply spiritual—a sort of vague metaphor of hope—but corporeal (bodily): a prototypical demonstration of what every believer will one day experience when raised in resurrection to a new and higher plane of life. In the resurrection, Christ became the Son of God with power (Rom. 1:3–4). Forty days later, he ascended to his Father (Lk. 24: 50-53; Acts 1:9–11). There he was rewarded for his work of redemption with an eternal state of exaltation (Phil. 2:8–9). He continues to this day to pray for his people and to empathize with them (Jn. 17:24; Acts 7:55; Heb. 7:25). He will do so until the final act of the drama of redemption is played out; namely, the second appearance of Christ “to judge the living and the dead” (cf. Acts 17:31). Determining the outcome of the judgment will be our spiritual and not our physical state. That is, whether or not we are alive to God and in relationship with Him (the Father) through Christ, His Son. Those who are alive, await with patience the consummation of the salvation we presently enjoy (Heb. 9:28).

THIRD AFFIRMATION: OUR BELIEF IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

We gladly affirm the Holy Spirit’s existence, personhood, and ministry. The holiness of the Spirit reminds us that he is no human spirit. He is the third person of the Godhead. As such he is no impersonal force. No force can be lied to (Acts 5:3, 4), tested in some personal way (Acts 5:9), fellowshiped with (2 Cor. 13:14), or grieved (Eph. 4:30). Co-eternal and co-equal with the Father and the Son, the Spirit’s role is to apply the very gospel the Father planned from eternity and which the Son has executed in time. He therefore brings the people of God from death to life, granting us faith, and directing us into a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the truth. As “the Spirit of adoption” (Rom. 8:15) he enables us to enjoy more of the filial assurance, freedom, and obedience of the gospel. The more we



do so, the richer becomes our belief in the Spirit. That said, belief in the Spirit is not an end in itself. The Spirit inspired and applies the Scriptures (the written Word) precisely in order that we may discern more of Christ (the living Word), growing increasingly into his likeness.

FOURTH AFFIRMATION: OUR BELIEF IN THE CHURCH

We believe in the “Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints.” The church is a miracle of God’s grace. By the appointment of the Father, the work of the Son, and the application of the Spirit, the church both exists and spreads. She is made up of believers of the Old and New Testaments. All believers are holy in a positional sense: we have been separated (“sanctified”) from the world unto God (1 Cor. 1:2). This, of course, does not mean that we must have a cultish outlook on anything not of the church, but it does mean that we operate in this life on the basis of principles significantly different from those in vogue among our peers. In doing so, we share a kindred experience with fellow believers all over the world regardless of gender, race, color, financial standing, or even denominational creed. In this sense the church is catholic (that is to say, *universal*, not “Roman Catholic” [which is an oxymoron]). She is also catholicising, since there are people groups yet to be reached with the gospel. Not all of us may be called to be missionaries, nevertheless every believer endeavors at least to embrace the inhabited world in prayer (1 Tim. 2:1). This is particularly important for local churches and denominations to remember. What we profess belief in, and work towards, is the communion not simply of the descendants of our particular theological tradition, but of all the *Saints*, whether actual or potential.

FIFTH AFFIRMATION: OUR BELIEF IN HOPE

The hope in which we believe is first and foremost spiritual. Its essence is the forgiveness of sins. This is the privilege of saints alone.

Later, at the time of the Reformation, this forgiveness was discussed against the backdrop of the doctrine of justification. We believe in forgiveness not chiefly because we forgive others, but because God has, in and through Christ, forgiven us. Our belief, then, is most joyful: we are no longer condemned! Christ, by virtue of his sacrifice, has freed us from sin’s guilt, and guaranteed that some day we shall escape entirely its pollution and presence.

Our hope, then, is also bodily. The promise of the gospel is not only that we shall be delivered from sin, but also from its every effect. The eternal life promised those in Christ is one that finally we shall live out in psychosomatic (body and soul) wholeness, and in a perfect and never ending enjoyment of assurance, freedom, and love. In a world of shattered dreams and broken promises, we maintain the faith we have been given in the divine promises of the fulfilled redemption we shall enjoy forever on the new earth (Matt. 19:28; Rom. 8:18–23).

Two sets of questions come to mind in closing:

First, where does this leave us individually? Can we each say without mental reservation: “I believe” these essential tenets of the faith? Before we each answer this question for ourselves, let us be clear on the nature of this belief. What Scripture means by belief is not typically something simply nominal or intellectual, but a saving faith that is convicted that the tenets of Scripture are true and personally applicable and is trusting in the triune God of whom these propositions speak. It is in our hearts then, as much as in our heads, that we affirm the Apostles’ Creed. After all, the Latin *credo* (“I believe”) comes from *cor do* (“I give my heart”). Faced with the great love of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit, and blessed with the communion of the saints and the certainty of eternal hope, dare we offer God anything less than ourselves and our lives? While the public affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed does not guarantee eternal life, those who possess it are not slow in affirming its truths, whether mentally, emotionally or volitionally (with our wills).



The Apostles' Creed
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Second, where does the Apostles' Creed leave our churches today? Attitudes to the Creed reveal the degree to which we adhere to historic Christian orthodoxy. In other words, while God continues to speak to us today, he does not contradict what he has already revealed in his Word. Rather, he applies his ancient Word to our hearts and calls us to obey it. By adhering to Scripture and its summary in the Apostles' Creed, we are reminded of the God to whom we are to submit. We also notify the church and the world that our congregation or denomination is not a cult but a member-body of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Let us then affirm the faith of Christ's Church confidently and publicly, with God's obedient people everywhere, and share the faith boldly, in the belief that as long as we echo Scripture and seek to glorify God, our voices matter, and contribute to the sustenance and growth of Christ's church.



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