

# I Believe... The Apostles' Creed

## Introduction

For many centuries churches have engaged in what is called catechetical instruction: initiation of its converts and its young in the life of the church. Perhaps some of you went through some kind of catechesis, for good or ill. This course takes up the structure of Western catechetical instruction is, built around the Apostles' Creed (our faith), the Lord's Prayer (our hope) and the Ten Commandments (our love), but approaches this material at a higher level and in a more open-ended way. There will be no memorizing of pat answers, but deep reflection on the central elements of Christianity. For the most part, I will be orienting you to the grand tradition of Christian thought, though at some times my own idiosyncratic take on the matters at hand will inevitably emerge. The bulk of these lectures -- the first eight weeks) will be dedicated to reflections on our Faith as it comes to expression in the Apostles' Creed. Such disproportionate attention on the intellectual content of the Christian tradition is appropriate given the place of this course within a seminary curriculum. But we will also address our hope as it cries out in the Lord's Prayers and our love as it is called forth by the Ten Commandments.

Now let's turn to our first installment of reflections on the creed

## Part I: Faith

The Apostles' Creed open with the phrase: "I believe." In Latin, the first person singular verb for believe is "credo," from which we get the word "creed." This little phrase guides the whole structure of the Creed. Since it contains a subject and verb, this phrase could stand as a complete sentence on its own. So let's think about what it means to believe.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for faith (*pistis*) appears numerous times and carries many senses. There are three primary senses that appear throughout the NT: (1) belief, (2) trust, (3) fidelity. The word faith does not mean all these things in every text. But faith does mean all these things in the life of the believer. A neglect of any one spells trouble. Let's take a look at each.

### (1) Belief.

To believe means to assent to certain propositions, to affirm that certain things are true. Belief is a crucial element in faith. It is fashionable from time to time to suppress the assenting character of Christian faith. Now it is true that Christian faith cannot be reduced to believing certain propositions. But it is not true that Christian faith can get along fine without propositions. You can't trust in a God you don't believe exists or don't know anything about. Belief that God exists is not sufficient -- even the devils believe and shudder. But belief that God exists is necessary. Christians believe that certain things are and that certain persons lived and did certain things. There's some data involved in faith. These beliefs are contained within Christian faith as a necessary part of it.

### (2) Trust.

But Christian faith is more than mere assent. To believe also means to trust in certain persons, to cling to them in time of need, to take them at their word. Trust is also a crucial element in faith. In reaction to the aforementioned fashion to suppress the assenting character of faith, there is the mirror opposite fashion to suppress the trusting character of faith. Now it is true that Christian faith cannot be reduced to an amorphous feeling of trust. But it is not true that Christian faith can

get along fine without a deep, heartfelt trust in God. Faith is both propositional and personal. It is both intellectual and emotional. If either pole is suppressed, faith suffers. Over-reaction in either direction deprives both sides. This unfortunate and unnecessary conflict comes to expression quite clearly in the division between pietism and scholasticism in European Protestantism in the 17th and 18th centuries. And you have probably encountered this conflict in your own church experiences. Let me tell you today that you do not have to make this choice. Christians both believe that God exists and trust in him.

### (3) Fidelity.

The dynamism of Christian faith is even more rich than the polarity between belief and trust. There is a third element. To believe also means fidelity, to be loyal, to persevere in one's belief and trust, to be faithful within a community. When you say, "I believe," you join your voice with the voice of the church in all times and places to declare a common faith. The Nicene Creed is helpful by using the plural, "We believe." Fidelity is a crucial element in faith. In the recurring conflict between intellectualism and emotionalism, we often forget the communal character of faith. Now it is true that Christian faith cannot be reduced to participation in a religious community and the preservation of its traditions. But it is not true that Christian faith can get along fine without communal continuity. God has chosen a people and in order to believe in and trust God one must participate in this community. To grow in faith entails initiation into this community. It is thus not coincidental that the Apostles' Creed and its antecedents emerged as a baptismal confession. Proclaiming this faith means joining this community.

Christian faith is belief, trust and fidelity. All three aspects are necessary. Now I need to admit at the outset that this series will give a large quantity of attention to the first aspect. That is not because of some kind of personal preference, but simply an inevitable consequence of engaging in a discursive exposition of the content of faith. The content of faith takes the form of doctrines, official teachings of the church on various topics. This does not mean that the ultimate object of faith is doctrines. No, God is the ultimate object of faith. But in order to express this faith in speech for the sake of communicating the gospel to others, one necessarily formulates doctrines. We need not apologize for this. It is appropriate for catechetical instruction.

However, despite this focus on beliefs, trust and fidelity will not and cannot be set aside in this series. On the one hand, exposition of the doctrines which we believe feeds trust and fidelity. Doctrinal reflection enlarges our understanding of the one in whom we place our trust and draws us into the great conversation of the community in which we embody our fidelity to God. On the other hand, trust and fidelity fuel doctrinal exposition. Trusting God and being faithful to him in the context of his church drives us to understand God more fully with the help of those who have gone before us. So as we turn our attention to the doctrinal content of faith, let's keep in mind the dynamism of faith as belief, trust and fidelity.

What are some consequences of neglecting one or more of these aspects?

Are there other key aspects I have overlooked that cannot be categorized within these three?

Addendum: Defining Terms

tradition - tools for the formation of a community that is extended over time

doctrine - rules for Christian worship and mission (doxology = orthodoxy)

theology - God talk; rational reflection on God; faith seeking understanding



## I Believe... God the Father Almighty

Two weeks ago I began a series of reflections on the Apostles' Creed, oddly (or aptly) titled Druchesis. Last week I simultaneously attended a conference and came down with a cold, so the second installment was delayed.

Let's turn our attention to our first topic or doctrine: God.

The first phrase of the first article reads: "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

This statement contains three terms worthy of reflection: God, the Father, Almighty. These three terms imply three claims: (1) God is God. (2) God is Father. (3) God is Almighty. Let's consider each in turn.

(1) God is God.

I believe in God. God is the first object of belief in the creed. And rightly so. Christian faith begins with God. Although we began with some reflections on faith in our first installment, this must never be taken to imply that our own faith and its needs and concerns supply the starting point of Christian theology. We enter with our faith, for it is the appropriate stance before the subject-matter of our reflection: God. So faith is the starting posture, but not the starting point. True faith is consumed not with itself but with its object, God himself.

So, what does it mean to "start" with God? Well, it means reminding ourselves that God starts with God. God does not come from us; we come from God. God is who he is prior to what we make of him. God is not just a big version of us (a.k.a., the big man upstairs). God is not a necessary postulate of the human mind, a projection of our dreams and wishes, a fulfillment of our needs and desires. If God is any of these things, he is these things after he is God in himself. God is God. That is the first thing theology must say. Before we specify who God is in relation to us, we must say who God is in relation to himself.

Of course, right there we bump into a difficulty. For how can we say anything about God himself? How can we know God in relation to himself? Do we not only know God as he relates himself to us? Do we not only know God as we believe in him, not as he is in himself prior to our belief in him? These are not just academic questions. These are genuine questions that emerge within the life of faith. On the one hand, we only know the God that we know. We only talk about God or talk to God as we believe in and understand him. On the other hand, when we talk about or to God, we really believe we are talking about or to something or someone other than and beyond the images in our head. We believe God truly is God.

Thankfully, this is not an irresolvable difficulty. And I really do mean "thankfully" (that's not just window-dressing). God in his grace has chosen to reveal himself as he truly is. God is the God who makes himself known as God. That is a gift worthy of our thanks and praise. We can talk about and to God as God truly is, for God reveals himself. We can and must say God is God, but only because God reveals himself.

Perhaps that last bit is too abstract a way of putting this. Let me put it another way: God is the God of the Bible. God is not just an idea about which the Bible supplies information. If that were so, we might ask whether the Bible is the only such source of information and whether the information it yields is adequate. But God is not just some idea. God is rather a character in a story. God is the central character in this particular story. God is a person who speaks and acts. God introduces himself, names himself, identifies himself in and through this specific story. God

creates the world. God elects Israel. God speaks with Abraham and to Moses and through the prophets. God sends his son Jesus. God pours out his Spirit on his church. God is the God who does these things. To start with God means to tell God's story. The God who appears in this story is who God is in himself. Therefore, when we say that God is God, we say so not to keep God at a distance, enclosed in himself, but to point to this God, the God of the Bible, as the one and only true God. We can and must say God is God, but only because God is the God of the Bible.

So, what can we say about the God of the Bible? Who is the God who reveals himself? What else can we say about God beyond the fact that God is God? Such questions could prompt us down many different paths, provided we are guided by Scripture in our answers. But since taking this next step corresponds nicely to the next term in the creed, let's follow the church's lead and develop our understanding of God in terms of his fatherhood.

(2) God is Father.

God is certainly spoken of as "father" throughout Scripture. We find it in the teachings of Jesus. We find it in the letters of Paul. We find it embedded in the imagery of Israel's prophecy and poetry. What do we mean when we speak about God as Father? What do we mean when we address God as Father?

Well, the first thing that comes to mind is that God is a father. God is fatherly. He loves and cares like a father. When we say this, we are employing the procedure of analogy. We are trying to describe what God is like by pointing to something similar. When we employ analogies, we always have to be careful to note the dissimilarity as well. This is always true of analogies, but it is especially when we use them for God. God is like a father, and yet he is also quite unlike our earthly fathers. We must always acknowledge the limits of theological analogies, especially because language that is intended to be positive (e.g., a caring and providing father) can so easily become twisted in light of negative experience (e.g., absent or abusive father). And even the positive aspects of the analogy are limited, because God is not just any father but the greatest father there could ever be, the first and primary father by which all other fathers are judged. So, when we use analogies, God's own unique activities should inform what we mean by them. Provided we remember these limitations, we can and should use analogies, and especially those found in Scripture.

But the creed does not here say that God is like a father. Rather, the creed speaks of God the Father. The definite article seems to be implying that, even as we employ analogical language here, we are not merely describing what God is like, but picking out who God is. Who is God? God is the Father. Of course, such an answer immediately demands a follow up question: the father of whom? You see, "father" is not only an analogical term, it is also a relational term. One could perhaps be fatherly by exhibiting certain father-like characteristics without in fact being a father. But to be a father one must have a child. If God is not only fatherly, but also a father, God must have children. Does God have children?

Well, in fact, he does. Christians speak of themselves as children of God, and not without reason. To be a Christian is to be adopted as God's child. But does this mean God was not a father before Christians came along? No, because God had already chosen the people of Israel to be his children long before. But what about before he called Abraham? The early chapters of Genesis as well as some vague references in the prophets indicate that God is in fact the father of all people and of all creatures. God is the father of all.

But what about before there was anyone or anything to be father of? Although it may sound a little strange, Christians believe that God has always been a father because God has always had a son, and his name is Jesus Christ. We will say more about Jesus when we come to the second article of the creed, which is dedicated to him, but we cannot avoid mentioning him here because the eternal fatherhood of God is grounded in the eternal sonship of Jesus. And this move is not thrust upon us by some speculative necessity, but is rather a heralding of the good news. For the adoption of Christians, the election of Israel, and the creation of the world are grounded in the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ. God is our father because, first and foremost, he is the Father of Jesus.

### (3) God is Almighty.

We have said much already about the identity of God--who God is. But we must also say a bit about the character of God--what God is like. Since I wrote a rather extensive series on the attributes of God two years ago, I refer you directly there. I don't think I would demur much from that presentation. However, I will say something here about the almightiness of God, both for the sake of creedal exposition and because my entry on God's omnipotence in the aforementioned series merely raised a classic question and did not attempt even a brief exposition of God's power. So, in light of what we have said about God's identity, what does it mean to say that God is Almighty?

God is mighty. God is strong. God is powerful. But God is not just mighty, strong, powerful. God is all-mighty, all-strength, all-powerful. As the classical attributes of God put it, God is omnipotent. The "all" or "omni" is the point here. All candidates for god claim to be mighty. People call on gods for their strength, especially in times of trouble. What makes God the true God is his almightiness. Anything less than all-powerful is not God. The rules governing analogy apply here too. God is powerful, but, unlike the various competing powers we encounter, God is all-powerful.

The importance of the "all" in the almightiness of God is crucial historically. The antecedents to the Apostles' Creed were developed during the controversy over gnosticism in the early church. One of the dangers certain key Christian leaders saw in gnosticism was its tendency to posit a fundamental dualism: an eternal competition between good and evil. Although this helps to solve the problem of evil (the bad things that happen can be attributed to the evil power), it undermines the lordship of God. In this scheme, God may be the central character in the story, but he is not the ultimate author of the story. Even if we root for him in the narrative, we have questioned his lordship over the narrative. So the early Christians put forth the almightiness of God to rule out this other way of telling the story.

But here we can easily hit a snag. For the almightiness of this God is revealed in weakness. This God rules over his people, yet at the same time interacts with them, listens to them, and even becomes one of them and suffers and dies. Now that is a strange sort of almightiness. There is a habit in the Christian tradition of distancing God from all these impotent moments. These moments in the story are called "anthropomorphisms," or in the case of Christ it is said that only his "human nature" expresses such weakness. This is a bad habit, for it traps God within his almightiness. We must not allow omnipotence to become an abstract concept that can rule over what God can and can't do. God is omnipotent with a specific purpose and so in a certain way. God is not simply omnipotent, full stop. God is omnipotent in a way that befits his identity as God for us, and so in a way that advances his story with us. In some cases, this may very well mean that God

overpowers his creatures. In other cases, God rules through weakness. In either case, God rules not by might or by power in their usual senses, but by his Spirit. God's power is the power of his Spirit, who is himself as he drives his story. The form which his power takes in particular cases is not arbitrary, but fits each case within the context of God's larger story. In this way -- and only in this way -- God is almighty.

Any thoughts?

Does my exposition of the statement "God is God" successfully account for both God's priority over against us and his relationship to us? Is the appeal to "revelation" here appropriate? Are divine priority and relationality theological values worth upholding? Are my brief comments on analogy helpful? Is the move to link God's fatherhood to Jesus the right move? What are some consequences of making this move? What are some consequences of not making this move? Is the "all" in God's almightiness really as crucial as I suggest? Could God's power be spoken of without the "all" or "omni" attached? Are such alternatives satisfactory? Does my talk of purposeful almightiness make sense? Is it a good idea?

## I Believe... Maker of Heaven and Earth

Let's continue our series of reflections on the Apostles' Creed. Last week we spoke of the first clause of the first article of the creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty. There we discussed God's priority, relationality, identity and character. God is God. God is Father. God is Almighty. In all these things we attempted to speak of God as he is in himself. This week we turn to the second clause of the first article of the creed: maker of heaven and earth. In so doing we turn to speak of God as he relates to us. Of course, last week we already spoke about how God relates to us, since there is no other way to think about God as relates to himself except as he relates to us. But this week we turn our attention directly to God's relationship to things other than himself.

Specifically, we turn our attention to God's relationship to all things other than himself. God is the creator of everything. That is the claim made by the second clause of the first article of the creed. It is an audacious claim. It may not seem audacious at first, for the definition of God as "maker of the universe" has come to be taken for granted in much of Western culture. When you ask someone whether or not they believe in God, they usually take you to mean, "Is there a personal power that made everything?" But during the early centuries of their missionary outreach, Christians could not presume such a definition of God. Some Christian preachers (Marcion, famously) even claimed that God did not make the world, and that such a denial is good news. Hence the declaration that God is the creator of everything finds its way into the earliest creeds. Against this background, Christian leaders developed the first crucial building blocks toward its own unique understanding of God's relationship to the world. This unique understanding is worthy of our sustained attention in order to see if there is more going on here than the now taken-for-granted definition of God as maker of the universe. What is taken for granted is quickly forgotten, easily corrupted, and eventually rejected. One of the tasks of theological reflection is to probe the depths of that which is taken for granted. So let's probe the depths of the claim that God is the creator of everything.

God is the creator of everything.

The first task of the Christian doctrine of creation is to clarify who creates. This was at the heart of the controversy with Marcion, mentioned above. You see, Marcion did not deny the existence of a creator. Of course there is some primary source or first principle from which all things emerge. What Marcion denied was the identity of this creator with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. The good God revealed in Jesus Christ is in a great battle with the evil god who made the world, known as the demiurge (Greek for 'craftsman'). The God and Father of Jesus Christ is concerned with eternal, spiritual things that lift us up, whereas the demiurge is concerned with temporal, material things that draw us down. Of course, such an opposition is difficult to reconcile with the picture of God in the Old Testament (not to mention the New), in which God is said not only to create the world and but also to get involved in the world with its temporal and material concerns. And so Marcion and others like him drew the logical conclusion that the God of the Old Testament -- the God of Israel -- is the demiurge, the evil god who created the world. On this theological basis he rejected the Old Testament as scripture, and while he was at it edited out much of the emerging New Testament.

Now this little historical foray is necessary inasmuch as it shows the interconnectedness of doctrinal topics. When we talk about creation, we are also talking about God, Israel, Jesus and the canon. In Christian theology, everything is related to everything else. That's, by the way, why the adjective "systematic" gets attached to some forms of theological reflection. The point here is

that, thanks to Marcion and his willingness to follow his own insights to their own logical conclusions, the early Christian church identified a puzzle inherent in its own proclamation that required clarification by means of rational reflection. Key leaders in the Christian community -- most famously, Irenaeus of Lyons -- successfully encouraged the church to identify the maker of the universe with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who creates is the God who saves. There is no opposition between creation and redemption, between the Old Testament and the New, between matter and spirit. There is one God, the Father Almighty, who is the maker of heaven and earth.

In doing so, the church upheld a number of theological values, which have been developed and explored in various ways over the centuries. First, creation is good. God in Genesis 1 declares the goodness of creation. The creedal word of thanks and praise to the God who creates ensures that no interpretation of Genesis 1 (or any other relevant text) is permitted which would impinge on the goodness of God's creation. For human beings in particular, this means that there is no part of us which is essentially bad, no part which we should seek to simply cast off. We will return to this in a few weeks when we speak of the final destiny of human beings. For now let's just make sure to agree with God when he says, "It is good."

Second, creation and redemption are positively related. The redemption wrought in Jesus Christ and perfected by the Holy Spirit are not an escape from the world which God the Father has made. To seal this point, Christians speak of creation as an act of the triune God. God the Father creates through the Son by the Spirit. The Word and Spirit are the "two hands of God," as Irenaeus put it. Including a first century Jew in the act of creation is not an easy claim to swallow. But doing so develops a line of New Testament teaching (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; John 1:1-4); however such passages might be variously interpreted in their original context. The point of such a development is to ensure a positive relationship between creation and redemption. There are a number of ways of construing this relation. There are two primary alternatives: either redemption is a restoration of what was lost in creation, or redemption is the fulfillment of an original creative purpose. Both may in fact be true in some sense. But either way the point gets across: creation and redemption are positively related.

Third, Israel is an essential character in the story of God told by the Gospel. The affirmation of creation and its material history makes room for the story of Israel within the story of God. Just as Marcion's rejection of God as creator led to the rejection of Israel, so the Church's affirmation of God as creator may lead to the affirmation of Israel. I say "makes room for" and "may lead" rather than "secures the place of" and "necessarily leads" because the church has consistently failed to remember the positive place of Israel in its message. The rejection of Marcion makes the affirmation of this positive place possible, but does not guarantee its execution. The terrible treatment of the Jews by the church throughout history is a testimony to this failure. In our time, especially in the wake of the Holocaust, we ought to go out of our way to speak positively of Israel as an essential character in the story of God with us.

Okay, that's enough for now on the identity of the creator and its implications. Let me just add two briefer points concerning the mode of God's creating and its scope.

God is the creator of everything.

The creed praises God as the maker of heaven and earth. But how does God make the heavens and the earth? It should be observed that Genesis 1 (and other relevant texts) uses the verb "create" in addition to, and in distinction from, the verb "make." Creatures also "make" things.

But only the creator "creates." But therein lies the problem: if only God creates, if creation is an absolutely unique activity, then how can we understand how it works? Are we simply forced to say that God creates and that he does so in a way wholly mysterious to us? Well, we should stand in awe of the mystery of God's creating. But such an awe-filled stance does not bar an awe-inspired inquiry into the mode of God's creating. When it comes to God's unique acts, the limits of our understanding are not set by our dumbfoundedness but by God's revelation. If God has revealed the mode of his creating, then we ought not suffer in silence but spring forth with praise for his mighty deeds.

And God has so revealed his mode of creating: God creates by speaking. In Genesis 1, God says, "Let there be ... and so there was ..." God in his awesome power (almightiness!) creates with his sheer word. Now we might just cast this off as poetic license in the opening chapter, if it were not such a pervasive theme in Scripture. God calls Abraham by speaking. God delivers the law to Moses by speaking. God judges his people through the prophets by speaking. God's speaking becomes flesh in Jesus Christ. God creates by speaking, and thereby initiates a history of speaking to and with his people.

Creation by speaking rules out a number of other modes of creation. Two particular alternative ways come to mind. On the one hand, God could be said to create by emanation. All things emanate from God. This was a particularly popular notion during the early centuries of Christianity. Emanation means that creation flows naturally out of God's over-abounding goodness. The world "spills out" of God, so to speak. And so creation is a lesser extension of God himself. Now there is an element of truth here. God does create out of his goodness, and there is a certain familiarity and fitness between God and his creation. But the emanationist model undermines God's purpose in creating. It is as if creation just "happens," almost out of necessity. Such a narrative does not cohere with the story of the God who creates by speaking in order to engage in a conversation with his creatures.

On the other hand, God could be said to create by sheer will. All things simply are because God willed it. This option emerges whenever Christians overreact to the emanationist tendency. Sheer will means that God arbitrarily brings worlds into existence, and so can just as arbitrarily change the rules of the world and destroy the world. Now there is an element of truth here too. God does create in freedom. He is not compelled by any force or necessity to create. And God remains Lord over his creation; creation has no inherent "claim" on God. But the sheer-will model also undermines God's purpose in creating. It is as if creation happens for no reason whatsoever, but simply because God wanted it that way. Such a narrative does not cohere with the story of the God who creates by speaking in order to engage in a conversation with his creatures.

God is the creator of everything.

Lastly, we should make a comment regarding the scope of what God creates. All along, we've thrown around the phrase "all things" as if it can be assumed. But this deserves our direct attention, for much of what we have already said could be maintained of a God who creates most but not all things. In fact, such a claim is probably easier to maintain. It is easier to think of God creates the good parts of the world. It is harder to give thanks and praise to a God who creates everything, because we are not always thankful for everything. Now we can make a caveat that some things are not God's direct will, such as the sinful things that humans do. We will come back to that. But even if that were an adequate answer on its own, we would still have to deal with the problem of those horrible things that cannot be blamed on any human agent (e.g.,

hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.). It might be easier to say that God is the creator of most things.

But that is not the claim of the Christian creed. God is the maker of heaven and earth. The phrase "heaven and earth" is there on purpose. It is to indicate the scope of God's creating. God creates everything, from top to bottom. God creates the spiritual and the material realms, and everything in between. As the Nicene Creed puts, "of all things seen and unseen." This blocks any gnostic half-way house that may avoid the extremes of the Marcion brand that rejects the creator outright. A God who creates some or even most things is still not the God of the Bible. A gnostic half-way house can come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. Perhaps God fashions some pre-existing material. Or perhaps God creates matter along a space-time continuum that is co-eternal with him. Or perhaps more crudely we can fall into the thinking of a full-populated heaven with angels, etc. co-eternal with God. But even angels are God's creatures; they may be immortal, but they are not eternal. The Christian church has blocked all these avenues by saying that God creates out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). There is no thing which God draws on to create. Nothing pre-dates God's creation. But the doctrine of creation out of nothing does not stand on its own. It is rather a negative rule that guards the positive praise that God is the creator of everything.

Any thoughts?

Do you see the connection between the identity of the creator and the character of creation? Am I right to make a big deal about this? How do you understand the relationship between creation and redemption? Are there any further implications of God's creating by speaking and out of nothing?

## I Believe... And in Jesus Christ...

We now turn to the second article of the creed. The focus of the second article is Jesus. We have already bumped into Jesus when reflecting on his Father in the first article. But now we focus directly on him. This article is not only placed at the center of the creed, but is also the longest of the three articles. One could say it is the heart of the creed. And that seems appropriate, for Christians bear the name of Christ. Explicit reflection on the one whose name we bear is central to the theological task of the church in all ages. It is with his name that the second article begins, followed by a few titles, before it tells a brief version of his story. This week, we will take up his name and titles, as well as the first episode of his story. These items bring into focus this week's topic: the identity of Jesus. Who is Jesus? He is the Christ, the only Son of God, our Lord, the who (among other things) was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. But before considering these things, let's begin at the beginning with the name, the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus.

### **Jesus**

At the heart of the Christian faith we find a person: Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, many communities organize themselves around significant historical persons. But Christians are consumed directly with the person of Jesus. Christians concern themselves not only with Jesus' teaching or mission or ideals or accomplishments, but also with Jesus himself. The little word "and" at the head of the second article is significant, because it means that just as we believe in God the Father Almighty, we also believe in Jesus. We believe in Jesus, not just an idea or a rule or a feeling, but a person.

We already indicated that the Christian God is personal. Such a claim required some reflection about the kind of God we believe in. In fact, the claim that God is personal is grounded in the person of Jesus. We know God is personal because Jesus is personal. Personality is not some abstract quality of the Christian God. God the Father relates personally to Jesus, and through him relates personally to us. In Jesus, God is personal.

But the claim that Jesus is personal does not require any complex logical moves. Jesus is a person in the most straightforward sense of the term. Jesus lived at a certain place in a certain time with a certain way of being in the world. He can be distinguished from other persons of his time and place. He is Jesus of Nazareth--a particular first century Galilean Jew. These particularities are decidedly historical: Jesus is a person located within the flow of human history. There is much that makes Jesus unique within this historical flow. Most importantly, he was raised from the dead and therefore he lives. So Jesus is not "historical" in the sense of being dead and gone, a great man to be remembered. But even as the one who overcame death, Jesus is and remains a historical person, a full participant in human history. The risen Jesus is and remains the Jesus he was in his own particular time and place. This is why the Christian Scriptures are organized around documents that tell his story: the four Gospels. The Gospels ensure that our faith in God and in his son Jesus does not fly off into fantasy or legality or idealism, but remains rooted in the historical person at the heart of its faith.

So what do we know about the person of Jesus? Well, persons can be known in two interconnected ways. We know persons by their relations: who they are in relationship to their parents and friends and associates picks them out from among all other persons. We also know persons by their narrative: what they do and how they do it, as well as what is done to them and how they take it, locates them in their unique place in human history and reveals much about

their character. The Apostles' Creed identifies Jesus by three titles, all of which identify him by his relations. Let's reflect on each of these titles before turning to the first episode in his narrative.

## **Christ**

Jesus is the Christ. "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah." Both mean "anointed one." The Messiah is the anointed one. By proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ, Christians are identifying Jesus by his relationship to Israel. He is the anointed one of Israel. He the one from among the Israelites who is set apart as their representative to perform a special task. Now Christians have had a long-standing habit of thinking that there was a secure concept of "messiah" within Israel's Scriptures and/or among Jews at the time of Jesus. The basis for this habit has been successfully deconstructed in recent years. There were in fact many messianic ideas on offer, and even many who claimed to be the messiah, as well as those who were suspicious of the whole messianic trend. The deconstruction of a stable messiah-concept need not trouble us theologically, for three things remain true: (1) at least in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, many Jews did live in a state of expectation and such expectations were tied up with the messiah, (2) the core element of anointing for representative service appears throughout the various messiah-concepts on offer, and (3) the meaning of "messiah" in the New Testament was from the beginning determined by Jesus himself and his unique identity and activity, not the other way around. The second point is instructive, because it locates Jesus within the long Israelites tradition of prophets, priests and kings. Jesus is anointed to enact the prophetic, priestly and royal missions within Israel and on behalf of Israel. But the third point is decisive. If Jesus does not "line-up" perfectly with any specific messianic expectation, that does not undermine his messianic status but rather indicates the way he fulfills and surpasses even the expectations of his own people. Yet precisely as the one who fulfills God's covenant with Israel, Jesus is identified by his unique relationship to Israel.

## **His only Son**

Jesus is the Son of God. We already mentioned the sonship of Jesus when we spoke of the fatherhood of God. There we hinted at a key building block in the later doctrine of the trinity: the eternal sonship of the Son. Or, in the classical lingo, the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. Here we are merely turning that wild claim on its head: instead of identifying the Father by way of the Son, we are now identifying the Son by way of the Father. By declaring that Jesus is the only Son of God, Christians are identifying Jesus by his unique relationship to God. He is the Son of God, the only begotten of God. He is therefore God the Son. Now it should be noted that "Son of God" does not necessarily carry such "divine" connotation in the New Testament. In fact, the language of "Son of God" had distinctively royal connotations, both in Israel and in the Roman Empire. On the one hand, Israel's king was the representative of God to the people and so was spoken of as God's Son (cf. 2 Sam 7 and Psalm 110, both of which became crucial Christological texts for the early Christian movement). On the other, Rome's emperor claimed quasi-divine status to secure his totalitarian rule. The former points us back to the first title (Messiah); the second points us forward to the third title (Lord). Suffice it say that "son of God" language in the New Testament does not serve as a simple proof-text for the divinity of Jesus. And yet, the church was not entirely without precedent as it moved forward in the development of its doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. For the New Testament does identify Jesus by his unique relation to God. He is spoken of as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). In these last days, God has spoken through his son, who is the exact representation of his being (Heb. 1:2-3). And

the Gospel of John is replete with explicit reflection on the unique relation of Jesus the Son to God his Father. And so it is not without warrant that the church, after centuries of struggle and refinement, came to praise Jesus as "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father" (Nicene Creed 325/381). These words of praise identify Jesus as uniquely and eternally related to God the Father.

### **Our Lord**

Jesus is Lord. This was the most basic Christian confession, which predates even the documents of the New Testament. To be a Christian was publicly to confess that Jesus is Lord. By confessing that Jesus is Lord, Christians are identifying Jesus by his relationship to us and to the world. The notion of lordship implies a domain: to be a lord one must have people or places over which one exercises his authority. A Lord without a domain is a laughing stock. Whose Lord is Jesus? First of all, he is "our" Lord, the Lord of those who believe in him--Christians. This confession got Christians in trouble, because the phrase "such-and-so is Lord" was reserved for Caesar. "Caesar is Lord" was the official gesture of political loyalty, expressed in everyday life, political pomp, and even religious ceremony. Now the Christians could have clarified that when they say, "Jesus is our Lord," they only meant he is their private Lord--their religious guru--and so not a threat to imperial authority. But the Christians did not make this clarification. Rather, they clarified themselves in the other direction: he is the Lord, the bearer of the divine name, the rule of all things. The early Christians would commandeer many of the appellations given to the emperor, declaring that Jesus and he alone could claim such titles. By doing so, Christians have from the beginning spoken of Jesus not just as a significant religious person but as the ruler of all things. Therefore, there is nothing outside the purview of Christian thought and action. This is not necessarily a justification to seize earthly powers, but it is certainly an indictment of any fearful or disinterested escape from the affairs of this world. The creed identified Jesus by his unique relationship to us as our Lord and to the world as the Lord.

### **Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary**

Having identified Jesus by his relations, the creed begins to tell his story. This story is introduced by the relative pronoun "who." The remainder of the second article of the creed hangs on this little word. The basic form of Christian belief is, "I believe in Jesus, who ... [insert narrative]." The basic form of Christian proclamation is, "Jesus, who ... [insert narrative], is Lord." Now the narrative found in the creed is anything but complete. Instead, it highlights key episodes in his story that Christians over the years have deemed the most crucial for understanding who he is. Many of the elements listed appear precisely because they were contested. So if something important is missing, it may be because it was never challenged. Of course, we know that things taken for granted are quickly forgotten and easily corrupted, so it is important to be ready to respond to new challenges to the story of Jesus. But as they stand, the classic creedal statements still serve to highlight the most crucial episodes in Jesus' story.

This week let's look briefly at the first episode: the origin of Jesus. Attention to the first episode is appropriate here, because even as this supplies the first moment in the story of Jesus, it continues to identify Jesus by his relations. On the one hand, Jesus is identified by his relation to the Holy Spirit by whom he was conceived. On the other, Jesus is identified by his relation to the Virgin Mary of whom he was born. This twofold statement points to the unique origin of Jesus. Of course, this statement has become hotly contested as some find the idea of a miraculous

virginal conception impossible to believe. Though the virgin birth may be difficult to believe, the miracle itself points to something deeper and perhaps even more difficult to believe: the incarnation of the God. The Son who is eternal with God, the Word through whom God created the world, has become flesh in Jesus Christ. This "becoming flesh" took place at a particular moment of time: when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary. The miracle points to the fact that the incarnation of God is not something that emerges naturally within the flow of history. The incarnation is a gift. It is the gift whereby God, without ceasing to be truly God, becomes a genuine human being. God is with us as one of us.

The twofold structure of this statement corresponds to the twofold structure of Jesus' person: he is both fully God (conceived by the Holy Spirit) and fully human (born of the Virgin Mary). The fact that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit means that he was in fellowship with God from the beginning of his existence, not adopted into such fellowship at a later point in time as we are. He is truly God, not just godly or godlike. The fact that he was uniquely born without an earthly father sets him apart from among his brothers and sisters as a man with an unprecedented mission, but it does not separate him from the human community. He is truly human, not just human-seeming. He is fully God and fully human.

Fully God and fully human. This twofold structure of faith in Jesus Christ, while traces of it can be found in New Testament (cf. Rom. 1:3-4) and it is implicit within much early Christian teaching, was declared orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon (451). Countering extreme views on all sides that either undermined his genuine divinity by separating divinity and humanity in him or undermined his genuine humanity by mixing divinity and humanity in him, Chalcedon confessed "one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, complete in divinity and complete in humanity... is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation. The distinction between natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person." This so-called "two-natures" doctrine functions as a rule for interpreting Scripture and for proper worship. No reading of the Gospel story is permitted which undermines Jesus' divinity or humanity or tears apart his person. Within these boundaries, one has great freedom in how to construe the complex relationship of divinity and humanity in Christ. But the point of all such ruled constructions is to point back to the central fact at the heart of the Christian faith: that God's word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Any thoughts?

## I Believe... Crucified and Risen

As we mentioned last week, Christian faith is centered on a person, the person of Jesus. And persons can be identified by two interconnected ways: by their relations and by their narrative. Last week we focused primarily on identifying Jesus within the context of his relations: he is Israel's Christ, God's only Son, and our Lord. We also considered the first episode in Jesus' narrative and the corresponding claim that he is fully God and fully human. This week we turn our attention fully to Jesus' narrative. In so doing, we are both filling out our understanding of his identity begun last week and bringing into focus a new topic: his saving significance. In many traditional discussions of Jesus, these two topics are variously divided under the headings "person" and "work" of Christ or "Christology" and "Soteriology." Such a distinction has a measure of heuristic value, but it is ultimately misleading because it so easily separates the identity and significance of Jesus. But these cannot be separated, for Jesus' significance for us consists precisely in his identification with us in the depths of our suffering and sin. Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us. Such a statement is an indication of both his identity and his saving significance. So, as we attend to the plot of his story and its significance for us, let's not leave behind reflection on his identity as though it were a finished task.

The story of Jesus can be organized in a number of different ways. Obviously, one could try to reassemble all the details of his narrative. We have already noted that such comprehensiveness is not the goal of the creed. Instead, the creed highlights the key turning point in the story: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Now if such a selection were merely arbitrary, we would have a problem. But the creed is in fact following the lead of the New Testament: not only do the Acts and the epistles contain brief statements of faith that highlight the death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. I Cor 15:3-4; Acts 4:10), but the Gospels themselves present Jesus' life story as resolutely oriented toward its climax in his death and resurrection (cf. Mark 8:31 & par; Luke 9:51). So the Creed is in good company when it highlights the death and resurrection of Jesus as the central episode in his story. Following this credal pattern, we will organize our reflections into four headings, speaking first of his suffering and death, then of his resurrection and ascension. All along the way we will meditate on the saving significance of the one who is identified by this narrative.

### **Suffering**

#### *Suffered under Pontius Pilate*

As already noted, the historical antecedents to the Apostles' Creed were decidedly anti-gnostic in orientation. The gnostic movement within the early Christian church downplayed the genuine historical suffering of Christ. Such an approach is a function of a wider docetic Christology in which the Son or Logos only appears to be human (*dokeo* means "to seem"). With such ideas on the radar, it should be no surprise that the suffering of Christ makes it onto the creed's short list of things to affirm.

However, such an affirmation has never been easy for Christians. Christians have consistently stumbled over the notion of God experiencing suffering in Christ. This probably has to do with the Greek philosophical inheritance and its presumption of divine impassibility (the notion that God transcends suffering). But whatever the source, the discomfort with divine suffering is a long-standing habit of Christian thinking. Reconciling this discomfort with an affirmation of the incarnation has motivated the creation of many careful distinctions that contributed significantly to the development of the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. Many of these

theological moves were made to protect either the Father or Christ's divine nature from the suffering Jesus undergoes according to the New Testament. Appropriating these doctrines today does not require that we share all their philosophical motivations or assumptions, but we ought to at least understand them so that we can grasp the complexity of this heritage.

Christian discomfort with suffering is not merely a by-gone habit from another time. It continues today. The belief that true faith guarantees immediate relief from suffering is widespread. Such a belief tends to treat the suffering of Jesus as a temporary ordeal, a bad weekend in Jerusalem that he quickly overcame by the power of his faith. Even Christians who valorize and idealize suffering, often with reference to the suffering of Jesus, have a tendency to undermine its seriousness precisely by valorizing and idealizing it--turning suffering into some kind of instrumental good or pleasure in itself. But the Christian story neither despises nor valorizes suffering. The story of Jesus shows that God in his mercy has compassion on the suffering of his people and yet overcomes it precisely by entering into it. That is the good news of the gospel: God did not stand aloof over our suffering, but participated in it. In Jesus Christ, God suffers with us.

## **Death**

*Was Crucified, Dead and Buried*

*He Descended into Hell*

But Jesus not only suffered with us, he also suffered for us. That little prepositional phrase "for us" brings us to our second heading: the death of Christ. As Christian Scripture and Christian piety repeatedly attest: Christ died for us. Jesus' obedience to the will of his Father led not only to his suffering and death in solidarity with us, but also to his suffering and death on our behalf, in our place, for our sakes. His was not just a death like any other. His was not even a death like any other horrible criminal's or political prisoner's. Jesus died as our representative, as our head, as the one true human who stands in for all the rest. Christ died for us.

How can we speak this way? What is it about the death of Jesus as narrated by the Gospels and highlighted by the Creed that indicates his death was for us? The clue in this direction is the manner of Christ's death. Jesus Christ died the death of a criminal. He was crucified. Crucifixion was the Roman punishment for political criminals. But what was his crime? The Gospels consistently present the trial(s) of Jesus as a sham, and the New Testament as a whole witnesses to his innocence and even sinlessness. So if Jesus' death was a punishment for a crime, yet Jesus committed no crime, why did he die?

This is where the notion of exchange or substitution comes in. Jesus the innocent died for us the guilty. Jesus the righteous died for us sinners. Jesus died so that we may live. Now such a substitution or exchange is not usually permitted in the legal world. Of course, one could appeal to God as the supreme judge who can do whatever he wants. But the Christian tradition at this point has usually shifted gears into the language of sacrifice, which already contains the logic of substitution (e.g., scapegoat, passover lamb, etc.). Whether mixing judicial and cultic metaphors is all that helpful can be debated. But the basic model shines through: Christ died instead of us so that we may be reconciled to God. Christ died for us.

Christ died for us. In order to hammer this point home, the Creed rattles off three verbs: "crucified, dead, and buried." Not only was he crucified, but he really died, and they put him in the ground. Then the creed takes it up a notch. The Creed highlights a muted but very real theme in Scripture: Christ "descended into hell." Upon his death, Christ went down (not up), to join the

dead who are separated from God on account of their sins. If there was any question that the crucifixion itself functions as a punishment, the fact that Christ suffers the ultimate fate of dead sinners in his descent should seal the deal. Now there is some debate as to whether this descent should be understood as a continuation of his substitutionary suffering or as a victorious invasion of the realm of the dead. I personally am attracted to the former option, but that does not necessarily require a rejection of the latter. What is most important at this juncture is to acknowledge that this obscure episode manages to make it into the creed and to hear this inclusion as an invitation to intentionally reflect on the saving significance of the time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

## **Resurrection**

*On the third day he rose again from the dead*

If Jesus' death saves us, if by dying in our place he reconciled us to God, then why is that not the end of the story? Why not just end the story of Jesus with the climactic episode of his death? Unfortunately, too much Christian preaching does in fact end there. So many sermons reduce the story of salvation to the death of Christ. That is not to say that these Christians don't believe in Christ's resurrection. But it does betray that Christ's rising from the dead has no theological function -- no place in the plot -- in Christian faith and practice. What purpose does the resurrection have? What is its place in the plot of the gospel story? Why did Jesus rise again from the dead?

No one can see nor come to the Father except through the Son. If the Son is dead, the Father is inaccessible. What good is our reconciliation with God if we cannot see or hear or taste it? Jesus was dead. The disciples scattered. His death may have saved them, but he was unavailable to them. But that was not the end of the story. In fact, it was only the beginning. Jesus came to them. Jesus appeared in their midst. He showed himself to be risen from the dead. The angels and women bore witness to his now empty tomb. On the third day he rose again from the dead. Jesus who died for us and for our salvation now comes to us as our savior.

There are many theological implications that follow from the resurrection of Christ. I will mention just three. First, God confirmed his work of creation. By raising his son Jesus from the dead, God confirms his intention not to give up on his creation but to redeem it. He will not save us by annihilating us or by tearing us out of his created order. He will save us by transforming his creation from within. This means that the hope of resurrection, far from being pie-in-the-sky escapism, teaches us to value God's good creation and hope for its redemption.

Second, God rendered the incarnation permanent. The eternal Son of God did not just become human for a little while. The incarnation was not a vacation, but the fulfillment of God's master plan. Jesus is and remains human for all eternity. This means that seeing God face to face will always involve the face of Jesus. This is why the name of Jesus is so crucial in the meantime. He is not just a way to God that can be discarded once we reach the goal. By his resurrection, Jesus is now the goal, the end, the purpose of all human life. It is worthy of note that the permanence of the incarnation is the theological reason why resurrection must be bodily resurrection. Perhaps you have heard a preacher harp on the bodily character of Jesus' resurrected body, or perhaps you have heard someone dismiss this claim as being too "literal." The issue at stake here is deeper than questions of Biblical literalism and historical verifiability. The issue cuts to the heart of the identity of Jesus and therefore the very identity of God. Is God truly revealed in Jesus Christ? Is God forever the God who takes up the cause and need of humanity? Is God really for us?

Incarnation rendered permanent by resurrection ensures that the answer to all these questions is a resounding "Yes!"

Third, God saves by giving life. By raising his Jesus from the dead, God shows that his ultimate intention for humanity is not death but life. God wants us to live! This means that salvation cannot be reduced solely to forgiveness. Now the power of forgiveness should not be dismissed. Forgiveness releases us from our past and thereby opens up our future. But our future is not merely a timeless state of being forgiven. The future opened by Christ's forgiveness is the eternal dynamism of life. Salvation is a matter of life and death. "I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). This eternal life breaks into to our lives in the present. "The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is in you" (Rom 8:11). The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that salvation includes the life-giving power of the Spirit at work among us.

### **Ascension**

*He ascended into heaven*

*and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,*

*from whence he come to judge the living and the dead.*

A final word must be added to all the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The crucified and risen Lord ascended into heaven. The second article of the creed concludes with Jesus sitting down at the right hand of the God mentioned in the first article: God the Father Almighty. The Creator and Lord of the universe has at his side his very own Son who is one of us, a human being, our brother. So we need not fear his coming at the end to judge, for he has shown himself to be on our side. This observation does not dismiss the seriousness with which we all must take the final judgment. But shaking knees are not called for. Hope and expectation are the proper attitude of those of who live in the time between the ascension of Jesus and his last descent.

But why ascend? Why not just wrap things up on Easter morning? Why is the resurrection of Jesus only a first-fruits, and not the harvest? Ascension is in fact good news, for it means that Jesus is giving us time to reap, to join along side him in his mission to the world. In the New Testament, the ascension of Jesus is consistently linked with the sending out of the disciples on their mission to the ends of the earth. In Acts 1 the connection is explicit: after forty days with his disciples, Jesus sends them out right before being taken up into a cloud. In Matthew 28 there is no explicit mention of an ascension, but in Jesus' last appearance to the disciples (which is equivalent to ascension) his final word is a word of commission: go and make disciples of all nations. In the gospel of John, resurrection and ascension and pentecost are all crunched together chronologically in such a way that upon his first appearance to the disciples, Jesus breathes his spirit on them while saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). In all these cases, the gift of the ascension is that Jesus gives us time to join him in his mission. The ascension means time for us, time for the church, time for the world, time for action, time for teaching, time for the Spirit. Ascension means the gift of time. May we use this time faithfully and joyfully as we join him on his mission.

### **Any thoughts?**

- \* How do you think of the place of suffering in the life of Christ and God's relationship to it?
- \* Can Christ's death be thought of as saving? Should this salvation be thought of in

substitutionary terms? What problems come with this model? Can they be overcome?

\* Why do we so easily forget the soteriological significance of Christ's resurrection? Is the general line I took on the matter (that in his resurrection Christ reveals himself as savior) helpful? What of the implications I noted?

\* Do you see the connection between ascension and mission? What other significance can be assigned to the ascension?

## I Believe... The Holy Spirit

This week we reach the third section within our series of reflections on the Apostles' Creed. The first three posts concerned the first article of the creed, as we considered our faith in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. The last two weeks were dedicated to the second article of the creed concerning Jesus Christ in his identity and saving significance. The next three posts concern the Holy Spirit, his own special role in God's story with us, and the anticipated completion of that story.

This week we focus on the first phrase of the third article of the creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." And so we come to pneumatology, or Spirit-talk. But here we hit a snag, for there is not much Spirit-talk in the creed. "I believe in the Holy Spirit." That's it. That's not a lot to work with. Although we've seen in this series how theologians can squeeze a lot of content out of a few words, we have to admit that talk of the Spirit in the Apostles' Creed is pretty thin. Unlike God the Father, who is praised for his attribute of almightiness and his activity of creation, and unlike Jesus Christ, who is confessed with honorific titles and whose story is told in detail, the Holy Spirit is simply acknowledged before moving on to other things like church, sacraments, forgiveness, etc. The Spirit seems to get short shrift. The Apostles' Creed ought not be singled out here, for such Spirit-forgetfulness is endemic, especially in the Western church. Not that the Spirit never makes an appearance, for outbreaks of exuberant Spirit-talk regularly occur. But such exuberant promotion of the Spirit is in fact a function of our pneumatological deficit, which invites an oscillation between Spirit-forgetfulness and Spirit-enthusiasm.

Now before we get too critical, we should remember that when we move from confession of faith in the Holy Spirit to what we believe about church, sacraments, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal life, we are not in fact "moving on." These are the works of the Spirit, his own identifying narrative, his saving significance for us. That's how the Spirit works -- in and among us. So he can be hard to pick out for direct reflection. The Spirit blows where he wills. But this quite true reminder is no excuse for forgetting to attend to the Holy Spirit in his unique identity. Who is the Holy Spirit? What is the Spirit like? How does the Spirit relate to God the Father and his son Jesus Christ?

In order to answer these sorts of questions, we need to be guided by the thicker talk of the Spirit found in the Nicene Creed. Just as with our reflections on the identity of Jesus we found it helpful draw on the results of that great council, so with our reflections on the identity of the Spirit we return again for guidance from Nicaea. Unfortunately, the original Nicene Creed from 325 does not fare much better than the Apostles' Creed (which shows how easy it is to ignore the Spirit). But this lacuna was filled a generation later at the first Council of Constantinople in 381, which produced what is now commonly called the "Nicene Creed" (a.k.a., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed). Constantinople both solidified the orthodoxy of the Nicene declarations concerning Son and extended parallel declarations to the Spirit. The first phrase of the third article of the Nicene Creed goes like this:

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord and Giver of Life,  
who proceeds from the Father,  
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified,

who spoke through the prophets.

We will organize our reflections around these five lines.

### 1. "And we believe in the Holy Spirit"

Here we find again that little word "and." Just as the "and" at the head of the second article signaled that faith in God the Father must be paired with faith in Jesus his Son, so this second "and" demands that our faith in God and Christ must be completed by our faith in the Holy Spirit. This is crucial, for we seldom think of the Holy Spirit as an object of faith. It's not that Christians don't believe the Spirit exists (ala the first sense of faith: belief), but rather that the Spirit is not often treated as a person (ala the second sense of faith: trust). Spirit-talk is often more akin to attribute talk: "God, send us your power, give us your grace, pour out your spirit." The Spirit in our everyday language is more of a thing than a person -- a divine thing for sure, but still something less than personal.

This impersonal manner of speaking is not inappropriate. It is in fact a very biblical way of speaking. The Spirit is the power by which God's people say and do things he asks of them. It is by the Spirit that we believe in God the Father and in his Son Jesus Christ. All this stuff we have been confessing in the creed is made possible by the Spirit. As Paul puts it, "Only by the Spirit can one say Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:xx) So the Holy Spirit is in the first instance the means by which we believe.

But we can't stop there, for the Christian church from early on and with little fanfare took another step. Christians began to regard the Holy Spirit as an object of faith. We not only believe by the Spirit, but also in the Spirit. In so doing, the church speaks of the Spirit in personal terms. He is not just a thing about which we believe, but a person in whom we believe. He is not just a thing we may ask for, but a person to whom we may address our requests. He is not just the object of actions (e.g., "God poured out his spirit"), but the subject of actions (e.g., "The Spirit sanctified them"). The Holy Spirit is a person.

Once the Spirit begins to be spoken of in personal terms, we run up against the question of his identity Who is this Spirit? How do we distinguish this Spirit from all the other spirits we may encounter? Well, we might first identify the Spirit as the spirit of the church. The Holy Spirit is the personified team spirit of the church of Jesus Christ. Now such an answer has a grain of truth, and we will come back to it next week when we speak directly of the church. Yet it is insufficient in itself, for the spirit is not the church, full stop. The church has many other spirits animating it, such as the unholy spirits of its many members and the spirits of the age that so often invade her. No, there must be a more definite way by which the Spirit is identified not only in and with the church but also over against it. The Spirit must be the Holy Spirit.

This more definite way is supplied by asking an alternative question: Whose Spirit is this? The possessive relative pronoun is not meant to revert back to impersonal Spirit-talk. Rather, it is to identify the Spirit by his relations. As we have seen in the case of God the Father and God the Son, there is nothing impersonal about being identified by one's relations. Quite the opposite. At least for the Christian God, persons are always and primarily identified by relations. One could even say persons are their relations. And there are those in the Christian tradition who have said such things, such as Thomas Aquinas, who said it both carefully and thoroughly. So, God the Father is the Father because he is the Father of the Son. And the Son is the Son because he is the Son of the Father. This much we have already stated. So also the Spirit is the Spirit because he is

the Spirit of the Father and of the Son.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is quite clearly both the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. He is both the Spirit of God the Father and the Spirit of the Lord Jesus (Paul). He is both the promise of the Father and the one whom Jesus pours out (Acts). He is both sent by the Father and breathed by the Son (John). Or, to tie all these relations together in one complex sentence: "the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is in you" (Rom 8:11). The Holy Spirit is the common Spirit of God the Father and God the Son, whom God shares with us and by whom we are drawn to God.

## 2. "The Lord and Giver of Life"

Having identified the person of the Holy Spirit by his relationship to the Father and the Son, we return to the question of his divinity. I say "return," because when we initially spoke of the Spirit, we spoke of him as an attribute of God, the mode of God's empowerment, a gift given by God. And so his divinity was not really questioned. Of course the Spirit of God is divine, just as the power of God and the grace of God are divine. But once we begin to speak of the Spirit in personal terms, the question of his divinity immediately arises. Is this third person truly God? Is the Spirit of God also God the Spirit? Is there room enough in God not only for a Father and a Son, but also a Spirit?

Well, once this question was put to the church, she very quickly said Yes. There were certainly objectors. But the argument was won pretty quickly. Perhaps too quickly, given the trouble the church has had since in clarifying its teaching on the Spirit. The proclamation of the Spirit's divinity is expressed nicely by the second line of third article of the Nicene Creed: He is "the Lord and Giver of Life." Those are two terms within theological discourse that may only be predicated of God. God and God alone is the Lord and Life-Giver. Not only is Jesus Lord, but so is his Spirit. Not only is God the Father Almighty the Creator (a.k.a., Giver of Life), but so is his Spirit. The Spirit is the Sovereign Lord and the Life-giving Creator. In other words, the Spirit is God.

Although these appellations are code-names for divinity, they are carefully chosen to be refracted in light of the unique personal activity of the Spirit. To get at this unique lordly and life-giving activity, let's take our cue from Paul in 2 Corinthians 3. In the course of defending his ministry, Paul speaks of the life-giving Spirit of Christ in contrast to the death-dealing letter of the old covenant. After speaking distinctly of the ministry of the Spirit and the unveiling of the Lord Jesus, Paul declares: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). Here the Lord and the Spirit are identified ("is") and distinguished ("of") in such a way that Jesus' Lordship in and as the Spirit does not bind us but frees us. By the Spirit, who is the Lord and is of the Lord, we are freed. What are we freed from? The letter which kills. In other words, from death. To be freed from death is to be given life. The Spirit by whom the Father freed Jesus from the dead is the Spirit who frees us from death. This is the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit of resurrection, the Spirit of new creation. God is Spirit, which means God as Spirit is free -- free from the chains of death, free from arbitrary restraints, free to be our Lord, free to adopt us as children and share his freedom with us. The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, is the Spirit of freedom. So the titles "Lord" and "Life-giver" indicate both the Spirit's divinity and the Spirit's way of being divine, his unique personal activity of liberation. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life.

## 3. "Who proceeds from the Father"

We must, however, return to the question of the Spirit's divinity a second time in order to sharpen the question. Up to this point, much of what we have said could be said of a quasi-divine intermediary being. The Spirit's role in Scripture is so clearly one of mediation, that it is easy to think of the Spirit as a sort of super-angel, God's primary agent of interaction with his world. If this were so, the Spirit would certainly be God-like and worthy of respect. Yet, if this were so, the Spirit would not be truly God. To be truly God, the Spirit must be God as God is God. For the Spirit to be truly divine, the Spirit must be God himself, God as he relates to himself, God in eternity. Is the Spirit God in eternity?

The Council of Constantinople answered this question in the affirmative. It confessed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. Just as the Son is truly God because he eternally generates from the Father, so the Spirit is truly God because he eternally proceeds from the Father. Now "procession" may sound like a technical term, but it is simply the noun form of the verb "comes forth." In Scripture, Jesus says that the Father will "send" the Spirit, who will "come forth" from the Father to his disciples (cf. John 16). What the fathers of the council wished to say was that this coming forth of the Spirit in time has as its ground a coming forth in eternity, and eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father. This distinction between the eternal procession and the temporal mission of the Spirit parallels the distinction between the eternal generation and the temporal mission of the Son. Each in his own way relates to God the Father eternally, and we know this because each is sent to us by God the Father in time. The divine missions reveal the divine processions. The personal, relational distinctions in God's story with us correspond to and are rooted in personal, relational distinctions within God's own eternal life.

[perhaps add an excursus on the filioque]

Now let's us conclude with two briefer points, each of which turns in a slightly more practical direction.

"Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified"

If the Spirit is an eternal divine person, then he is a proper object of worship. He is not only to be believed in, but also worshiped. It is worthy of note that the worship of the Spirit sparked the controversy that eventually led to the Council of Constantinople. Although the person of the Spirit can sometimes be a bit slippery in the New Testament, his presence in its many doxologies alongside the Father and Son is thoroughly anchored. Paul's blessings often take on a trinitarian structure, and Matthew's baptismal formula is unmistakably triadic. These doxological references to the Spirit flowed naturally into the worship life of the early church. Many of the arguments for the divinity of the Spirit emerged in order to defend this practice against its critics. The fathers argued that the Spirit is not just honored but truly worshiped, not alone but together with the Father and the Son. The phrase "together with" points to the doctrine of perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of the persons of the trinity. The fullness of the Father dwells within the Son and the Spirit. The Father and the Son mutually glorify one another throughout eternity (cf. John 17:1-5). The mutual glory of the Father and the Son dwells fully in the Spirit, and so the worship due the Father and the Son may and must also be given to the Spirit.

The practical important of the doctrine of the Spirit's divinity in particular and the doctrine of the Trinity in general is a summons to worship God in his trinity. Orthodoxy means, in the first instance, "right praise." So my advice to those who doubt the doctrine of the trinity is to begin to worship and glorify the Father and the Son together with the Spirit. Try it and see if it seems appropriate to you. My advice to those who are confused by the doctrine of the trinity is to pray

to the Father with the Son in the power of the Spirit. Try it and see if the logic of their relations comes into view. My advice to those find the doctrine of the trinity irrelevant is to let the grammar of the trinity guide your proclamation and praise. Try it and see if it makes any difference for you, even if it's just a word here or there.

##### 5. "Who spoke through the prophets"

Having moved from the mission of the Spirit in time to the procession of the Spirit in eternity, the creed turns its attention back to the Spirit's activity in history with the phrase "who spoke through the prophets," and thereby terminates its direct talk of the Spirit. Such a "coming back down to earth" is appropriate, for all that talk of eternal procession and mutual indwelling is not a speculative end in itself, but rather a necessary means to a very practical end. The eternal procession of the Spirit within God's own triune life assures us that the Spirit's work among us is trustworthy. The Spirit who speaks to us can be trusted to speak the very mind of God, for he is God. The Spirit searches the deep things of God. The Spirit who testifies with our spirit that we are God's children is not just any spirit but the very Spirit of God. The Spirit of adoption is God's own Spirit, by which we cry Abba Father. God's eternal Spirit gives us confidence to speak the word of God, to say that Jesus is God's only Son and our Lord, that we are his brothers and sisters and so therefore sons and daughters of God the Father Almighty. The assurance of faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit--God's gift of himself to us.

How does the Spirit so testify? How does the Spirit assure us that we are children of God? By speaking through the prophets. Here is the right place to speak of the inspiration of Holy Scripture. Although we have been using the Bible all along as the source and norm of our knowledge of God, we chose not to speak of its inspiration earlier in order to avoid the impression that an inspired text provides some kind of foundation on which theology builds its towers. Theology does not build on Scripture, it lives by Scripture. So here, in the third article of the creed wherein we speak of the life-giving power of the Spirit, is the right place to talk about the inspiration of Holy Scripture.

The holiness of scripture is grounded in the holiness of the Spirit who inspires it. God the Father set apart the writings of the Bible to bear witness to his Son Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit. All scripture is God-breathed, inspired, equipped for its task so that it will not return void. This extends not only to the prophets of Old Testament but also the apostles of the New. In a different but related way, the Spirit illumines the Christian to believe and understand and apply the Bible today. [Note: internal testimony of the Holy Spirit] The import of inspiration is that we must always contend with both the Word and the Spirit. The Spirit never blows without using his concrete inspired Word. Yet the Word never speaks without the empowerment of the Spirit.

Practically speaking, what does this mean for us? On the one hand, we ought to test the spirits against the written word to see if they are of God. In light of the eternal relation between the Spirit and the Son and Father, we should expect the Spirit to reveal today in a way consistent with the way he has revealed in the past. The Spirit is not predictable, but he is faithful. On the other hand, we ought to be filled with the Spirit as we read and hear the written word. We must listen to the written word of God always and only by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit guides all genuine reading of Scripture. As one medieval monk put it, we cannot understand the Word of God if we are not filled by the Spirit who inspired it.

Any thoughts?

What are some of the causes of our Spirit-forgetfulness?

What are the limitations of speaking of the Holy Spirit in personal terms? Does understanding triune persons in terms of their relations help or hurt the matter?

Is it right to think of the Spirit's Lordship and Life-giving power in terms of divine freedom? What are some other ways of refracting these divine code-names in light of the unique personal activity of the Spirit?

Is the doctrine of the eternal procession of the Spirit a necessary one? What problematic avenues of reflection does it wisely seal off? What problems does it create?

How do you speak of the person of the Spirit in your own life? Do you address the Spirit in prayer and praise?

Any thoughts on the place of the inspiration of scripture within the context of the Spirit's unique role in the story of God with us? Was this the right place to bring it up? If not, when should it come up?

## I Believe... The Church

### **Introduction: The Church as an Object of Belief?**

And now we come to the church. The creed has been speaking of the identity and activity of God the Father, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and then all of the sudden turns its attention to us. Of course, the church has been the elephant in the room all along, for it is the church who believes, promulgating creeds and developing doctrines in order to regulate its witness in the world and worship of the triune God. The church is the believing subject of the creed. That is why it is so odd to turn our attention to the church, because now we are treating the church an object of belief: I believe in the Holy Catholic Church. Is the church really an object belief alongside the triune God?

The answer to this question as stated is no. The church is not an object of belief in the same way as God is. Here is a good place to recall the three senses of faith outlined in the first week of this series. In terms of faith as trust, we do not put our trust in the church. We do not cling to the church in life and death. Such a posture is reserved for God and God alone. Trusting in the church alongside God is an act of idolatry.

In terms of faith as fidelity, however, we are called to be faithful to the church. The church is precisely the context in which we embody our fidelity to God. But even here there is a distinction, for our faithfulness to the church is a means, albeit a necessary one, toward the end of faithfulness to God. So the church is an object of faithfulness, not alongside but along the way to God.

In terms of faith as belief, assenting to propositions, we certainly do believe certain things about the church. The creed attaches adjectives to the church, which implies we believe these adjectives aptly describe the church. But such beliefs do not have the same status or significance as our beliefs about God. The church is not the central character in the story; God is. This does not mean the church is dispensable. It just means the church is not the same sort of thing as God is. The point is that beliefs about the church do not supply the center of gravity around which all other beliefs are organized. Quite the opposite is true. Beliefs about the triune God condition beliefs about the church.

This **broader theological context** is crucial not only to block ecclesial arrogance but also to properly uphold the crucial place of the church in the story of God. Too often the church is dismissed as an unnecessary appendage to the gospel. You have heard it said, "I'm spiritual, not religious." Perhaps you have said it yourself. Placing the church in its broader theological context, "putting the church in its place" so to speak, is the best response to this endemic problem. We've been doing this all along in this series, but let's make the connections explicit with three brief statements.

(1) **The Father elects the church.** The God of the Bible is a God who chooses a people. This doesn't mean God doesn't love all people. But God spreads his universal love through particular communities. God is the God of history and therefore works in and through particularity. This does not cease with Christ, but is intensified in him and then bursts out through the church whom he sends out into the world. Which brings us to the second point

(2) **The Son institutes the church.** Alfred Loisy once said, "Jesus preached the kingdom, but the church came instead." Now he meant that with several layers of irony, but at least one level the proper response is, "That's exactly what Jesus wanted!" Jesus preached the kingdom and he sent

his disciples preach that same kingdom, of which he is the king. The church was not an accident but at the heart of Jesus' own mission. Nothing speaks more to his intention to establish a community than the institution of the Lord's Supper, giving his disciples a concrete practice to continue after his death and resurrection. The many promises given to the community so gathered points to Jesus' ecclesial intentions. The mention of promise brings us to our third and last point.

(3) **The Spirit constitutes the church.** Jesus promised that the Father would send another comforter, who would be poured out on his disciples to equip them for mission. At Pentecost, the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus who had ascended to the right hand of the Father descended upon his disciples. In so doing, the Spirit constituted the church. The church has its being in its act of mission. The church's mission is not a bonus activity appended to its self-enclosed communal being. The church exists as the sent community. So the outpouring of the Spirit is not reserved for special functions or functionaries of the church, but constitutes the church as the community sent for the sake of the world.

Within this context and under these conditions, we can and should join our voice with the church in proclaiming our beliefs about the church. Theological reflection on these beliefs (called "ecclesiology") traditionally takes its cue from the adjectives attached to the church in the creed. Let's follow the tradition's lead and organize our discussion of the church around the so-called "Notes of the Church."

### **The Notes of the Church**

The "notes" of the church are those attributes that the creed predicates of the church. The Apostles' Creed declares two such notes, "I believe in the Holy Catholic church." The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed expands this to four: "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church." Now the problem we immediately run into is that these notes are often regarded as criteria for finding the true church. They function as a checklist for church shopping. But so treating the notes of the church sets one up for disappointment. What church has all these notes? What local church is truly catholic? What denomination is truly one? What tradition is thoroughly apostolic? What community is genuinely holy?

Now there are lots of clever ways of construing these notes to avoid disappointment. For instance, one might say that these are attributes of the invisible church. Now the notion of the invisible church is a necessary one. The true church of Jesus Christ cannot be strictly equated with one or many visible institutions. On the one hand, the church is less than the visible church, for ecclesial institutions are mixed bodies, full of those who are not genuine Christians. On the other hand, the church is more than the visible church, for there are genuine disciples of Christ who have been estranged from the institutional church. So there is a place for talk of the "invisible" church.

But we must be very careful here, because such invisibility can be an escape for the very concrete calling to which the church is called. The invisibility of the church can be used to justify schismatic departure from the church or apathetic maintenance of the church's failed institutions. After acknowledging the theological function of the invisible church, we should turn our attention solely to the visible church. In what sense do the notes of the church apply to the visible Christian community?

Since we have already proposed that the Spirit-constituted church has her being in her act of

mission, the notes cannot be regarded as static attributes of the church. They cannot describe the being of the church abstracted from her forward-moving activity in the power of the Spirit. The notes do not point *up* to an invisible church, nor do they point *in* to self-enclosed well-ordered community, nor do they even point *back* to some pristine church of the apostles. The notes point *forward and outward* to the church's mission for the sake of the world in light of the coming kingdom of God. Such a missional account of the church requires that we turn the Nicene notes of the church on their head, beginning with the last one first.

**The church is apostolic.** Apostolicity should be understood according to its root meaning as "sent-ness" (the Greek word *apostello* means "to send"). The point is neither apostolic teaching (Protestant) or apostolic succession (Catholic), but the continuity of the apostolic mission to the nations. The true church is the one that is being sent into the world.

**The church is catholic.** The church is sent to the whole world (*kata holos* means "according to the whole"). So catholicity should be understood in terms of the global reach of the church. Catholicity should not be seen as some sort of achieved consensus, but rather a sought-after scope. The true church is the church that is spread throughout the world.

**The church is holy.** In a missional context, holiness must be in terms of hospitality. Just as the heavenly father sends the gift of rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous, so the church is also to love both its friends and enemies (Mt 5:43-48). Holiness is not a statically perfect subject, but an outward-motion toward a complete object: the world. Holiness defined as hospitality is the natural result of missional apostolicity and global catholicity. The encounter with the global other in mission leads to hospitable perfect love.

**The church is one.** The oneness of the church must be located within God's reconciliation of the world to himself through the church's ministry of reconciliation. Unity is therefore not a given but a gift. Yes, the visible unity of the church is to be desired, and its absence is tragic. But church unity is not an end in itself, but is intended to serve the church's mission within the context of the ever-increasing unity of all creation. It is no coincidence that the modern ecumenical movement began on the mission field. The early ecumenists saw that unity could serve mission. But just like the previous notes, unity is only found as it flows from the mission of the church. Missional apostolicity leads to global catholicity, which in turn breeds hospitable holiness, preparing the way for reconciling unity.

Now, does all this future-oriented talk get the visible churches off the hook? If the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is out in front of us, then can local churches, denominations, and the global Christian community simply rest easy and say, "We're on a journey. God's still working on us." Such an attitude is opposed to the intention of a missional ecclesiology, which calls us to live up to the calling to which we are called. But to block such an unintended consequence, some kind of standards must be set. Although the notes cannot function as a criterion for finding the true church, there must be some criterion by which communities can be judged to be genuinely ecclesial communities. What makes a church a church? This is where the reformation tradition of the "marks of the church" comes in.

### **The Marks of the Church**

During the ecclesiological revolution that came to be known as the Reformation, the various protestant groups were compelled to defend themselves against the charge of schism. The general response was to develop a doctrine of the marks of the church whereby one can identify

the true church from the false church. The marks of the church were not meant as a church-shopping list but a church-staying list, a means of justifying participation in communities estranged from the Roman Catholic Church. The practical function of the marks of the church is not to have impossibly high standards but to have a clear low-water mark: if a community falls below this line, one is free to break fellowship without being a schismatic church-divider or shallow church-hopper.

Now there is no revealed list of marks, but various lists have been proposed. Martin Bucer, the leader of the reformation in the city of Strausbourg, recommended three marks of the church: church is wherever the pure word of God is preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is properly executed. Because of the perceived abuses of the radical reformers in their emphasis on and application of church discipline, many magisterial reformers (such as John Calvin) dropped discipline as a mark of the church in favor of the twofold pattern of word and sacrament. The debate concerning two or three marks re-emerged a century later during the Puritan controversy in England. The Puritans pushed for the return of discipline as the third mark of the church, and on its basis began to question the authority of the Anglican Church. Through the influence of his Puritan heritage, John Wesley affirmed the third mark and the churches that developed out of the Methodist revival include the third mark in their constitutional documents, many of which are not inconsequentially named "The Discipline." Denominations with roots in the Evangelical revivals in which the Methodists took part tend to also affirm this third mark in one way or another.

Now this historical excursus not only helps you see some of the options for constructing the marks of the church, but also encourages you to see **the importance of concrete practices for the church**. The church is identified by her actions, not by her abstract ideas or her amorphous feelings. The church has its being in its act of mission to the world, which takes concrete form in her proclamation, worship and discipleship. Just as the triune God is identified by his narrative, so also the church is identified by her narrative. This is so because the church is personal -- not a triune person, but a person created in the image of God. Scripture speaks of the church in personal terms: the church is the people of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, etc. These personal categories speak of the church not only as a community of like minded individuals, but a communion of persons and so a communal person, who communes with the triune God as she participates in God's mission in the world. The mention of communion brings us to the next line in the creed.

### **The Communion of Saints**

The next two lines of the Apostles' Creed are not new topics but further specifications of the work of the Spirit in the church. We not only believe in the holy catholic church, but also in the communion of saints. What does this phrase mean? Well, it initially referred to faithful who have died and are no longer with us. The church believes that it communes not only with fellow Christians of today but also with fellow Christians of yesterday. As the church proclaims the gospel, she carries forward the mission of the apostles. As the church gathers for worship, she joins the praises of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before her. The communion of saints therefore speaks to the historical continuity of the Christian community throughout time. But this continuity is not conceived in solely institutional terms, but in personal categories. The church is the communion of the faithful with Christ and one another as we walk together as one person with one purpose. In other words, the church is the body of Christ.

The reference to communion rightfully brings with it the connotation of the Lord's Supper, also called communion, eucharist, mass, etc. We have already mentioned the Lord's Supper as evidence of Jesus' institution of the church. The language of "institution" in fact comes from the Lord's Supper liturgy, which speaks of the "words of institution." The double meaning of all these words is purposeful, because it points to this meal as the means by which the church is gathered and equipped for her service in the world. It is the practice by which she hears and proclaims the gospel not only with audible words but with visible objects and actions. It is Jesus' own chosen object-lesson, symbolizing his broken body and shed blood. Such visible words in the church are referred to as sacraments. Whether one has or even needs a particular theory for what makes this meal special, the point is that the church is not alone in her mission, but is fed by her Lord and has fellowship at his table with him and with one another. Even as he sends us out into the world, he gives us the promise of his perpetual presence (Mt. 28:20-21). The sign of this presence, the visible pointer to the deep truth of the communion of saints, is the Lord's Supper.

The mention of saints of course brings up the question of sainthood. Is there a special category of Christians called "Saints." One can see how such a category emerged. If we believe that the church here on earth communes with those who have gone before, then it is easy to start thinking about specific dead Christians. The first that come to mind are the martyrs, those who died for their faith. The martyrs were held in high regard from the very beginning, as can be seen already in the Book of Revelation. Such special regard was then easily transferred to other exemplary Christians. Then distinctions start to be made between "saints" who go directly to "heaven" and those "souls" who must be "purged" of their sinfulness before coming into the presence of God. It is important to see the sensibleness of this train of thought, even if one has good reasons not to board this train. One need not disparage the many exemplary Christians who have gone before us in order to avoid the abuses that such a train of thought has produced.

At the end of the day, however, one must remember that in the New Testament all Christians are addressed as "saints," even those confused and conflicted Corinthians. Christians are by definition saints because the Holy Spirit sanctifies the church. Here we must make reference to the doctrine of sanctification. God desires a holy people. And so God sets apart a people for his own purposes, God cleanses his people from their sins, and God fills his people with the power to live a new life for him. Sanctification is the work of God. It is a gift -- the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians together seek to live a holy life, set apart for God's use. They do so not in their own power but by the power of God. God is faithful, and he will do it (1 Thess 5).

### **The Forgiveness of Sins**

After speaking of the heights of the church's missionary purpose and communal sanctification, the creed reminds of where we come from and where we return again and again: that we were and are sinners in need of forgiveness by a gracious God. We are not only communing saints but forgiven sinners. This is not meant to bring us down a notch, but to call forth our thanks and praise. We must be forever thankful that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us; that God did not hold our sins against us but reconciled us to him in his son; that God had mercy on me, a sinner. With this word of thanks we come to the doctrine of justification.

Now we have already spoken of the basis of God's justification of sinners when we spoke of the cross of Christ. So we need not linger long here. But it is important to speak of forgiveness not only there and then, but also here and now. There is a traditional distinction made between

redemption accomplished for us in Christ and redemption applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Whether the distinction itself is helpful or not, I'll let you be the judge. The point is that the forgiveness given in Jesus' death really comes to us by the power of his Spirit. We can be assured of our forgiveness of sins, and walk in the freedom that this brings. This freedom is not to be abused, because it is a freedom with a purpose, freedom for new life in Christ. This is why it helps to speak of our being sanctified for the mission of the church first before turning back to the word of forgiveness. But nevertheless this word of freedom must be spoken and never left behind.

Just as the communion of saints has a visible sign, so too the forgiveness of sinners has a visible sign: baptism. The Nicene Creed makes this connection explicit: "We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sin." Baptism visually portrays the death of the old life and the beginning of the new, the cleansing of the flesh and outpouring of the Spirit. It the rite of initiation into the church and thus a sign of conversion to the gospel and its proclamation. In baptism one both hears the gospel spoken to oneself and is called to speak the gospel to others. As such it is the ordination of all Christians to the ministry of reconciliation. That is not to deny that there may be special functionaries within the church's life and that special rites may be instituted to set apart these people for service. But all such rites are subordinated to the common baptismal calling of all Christians to preach the gospel of forgiveness out of thankfulness that they too are sinners saved by grace.

Any thoughts?

- \* To what extent is it appropriate to develop a doctrine of the church?
- \* Does the larger theological context sketched above help address the problem of dismissing the church, at least on an intellectual level? What else can be done to respond to this problem? Is it even a problem?
- \* Do you agree that the church has its being in its act of mission? Does such a privileging of mission in ecclesiology have some drawbacks? What other concepts might function better at the center of ecclesiology?
- \* Does my idiosyncratic presentation of the notes of the church connect with you? Why or why not?
- \* What kinds of "marks" do people implicitly use to evaluate particular Christian communities? How should the marks of the church function? What do you believe are the marks of the church?
- \* What does a belief in the communion of saints entail? What does it not entail?
- \* What does sanctification in the context of the church look like?
- \* Do the Lord's Supper and Baptism succeed as signs of the communion of saints and forgiveness of sins? Should their "success" even be evaluated, and if so, how? If they fail, what other signs are available to point to these truths?

## I Believe... Introduction: The Kingdom of God

And now we come to the end. Not the end of our series, since we will next discuss the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in accordance with the catechetical tradition. And not the end of the story, for the good news of the gospel is that the end is just the beginning. Rather, we come to the end of God: the end for which God created the world. At the conclusion of the creed we speak of the fulfillment of God's purposes, God's "end" in the teleological sense of the word. And so we come to eschatology: the doctrine of last things.

The term "eschatology" can be a bit misleading, for talk of "last things" seems to locate these things as merely the last in series of similar things. But nothing could be further from the truth, for these things are not "things" like other things that just happen to come last. These things are final consummation of God's own purposes, the culmination of creation and redemption. These things are the fullness of all things, a fullness initiated and achieved and revealed by God himself. And so eschatology does not engage in "futurology," wherein we predict facts about the future in order to generate beliefs akin the beliefs so far expresses in the creed. Rather, eschatology is theology, a form of God-talk. Specifically, it is theological teleology: reflection on God's own purposes revealed in Jesus Christ and promised in the Holy Spirit. So it does not speak last things as much as it speaks of the Last One: God himself from the perspective of his final purposes.

The category around which we can best organize reflection on God's purposes is the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a (if not the) pervasive theme in Scripture. It is the expectation of Israel, the content of Jesus' preaching and activity, and the driving hope of the Christian community. Kingdom-language has a comprehensiveness to it that avoids exclusively futuristic talk of last things. Kingdom-language teaches us to think eschatologically not only about eschatology itself but also about all theological topics -- seeing all things from the perspective of God's coming reign. In fact, we have been thinking this way all along in this series, for we have spoken of faith in terms of the story of God with us. God's story is not a pointless meandering adventure but a purposeful narrative with a beginning, middle and end. The mission of God with us has a purpose. The Father sends his Son in the power of the Spirit in order that all things might be reconciled to him and in him. So missional narrative theology, at least of the sort exemplified in this series, is eschatological theology. It is theological thinking that takes its bearings from God's kingdom purposes.

So, if the kingdom is the key to theology in general and eschatology in particular, what is it? What is the kingdom of God? Well, there are a lot of ways to define the kingdom of God: it is God's realm, God's effective presence, God's people in submission to him, God's own heavenly space, etc. Although strict definitions are seldom helpful in crucial theological matters, a strict definition of God's kingdom is particular difficult to come by. Why? Because God's kingdom is by definition indefinable. As Jesus' kingdom parables attest, God's kingdom is unpredictable. It is full of surprises. This is precisely because it is God's kingdom: the fulfillment of his work of creation and redemption and therefore the surplus beyond what is inherent in the created order. The kingdom is the transcendent purpose of God for his world. And so it exceeds expectations and detailed descriptions. That is why a strict definition is not the way to go.

Does this mean we have nothing to say about the kingdom? Certainly not! We can still point to the kingdom. We can pick it out. How? Well, instead of a strict definition of what the kingdom is, we can begin to understand the kingdom in terms of what it is not. Now I don't mean just

saying a bunch of stuff it isn't. Saying the kingdom of God is not a banana, though accurate, doesn't reveal much. Rather, I am suggesting that we gesture at the kingdom by speaking of in terms of its relations. You may recall this is how we speak of the trinitarian persons: they are identified by their opposing relations. An analogous procedure may be helpful here. In the case of the kingdom, we pick it out by its relation to the church and to the world.

On the one hand, the kingdom is not the church. The kingdom cannot be equated with the church. The church seeks to live in light of the kingdom, but it is not itself God's kingdom. The kingdom is more than the church: God has more in store for the world than it merely joining the church. The kingdom cannot be sacralized. We often forget this, thinking that building the church simply is building the kingdom. But it is never that simple. Remember Alfred Loisy's famous quote from last week: "Jesus preached the kingdom, but the church came instead." We already pointed out one of the layers of irony in this quote. Another of those layers is the blunt reminder for the church to preach not itself but the kingdom of God. In other words, the kingdom is not the church.

On the other hand, the kingdom is not the world. The kingdom cannot be equated with the world as it is, or even the best parts of the world. The world is waiting for the in-breaking of God's kingdom, and there are certainly signs of the kingdom popping up in the world outside the walls of the church. But the kingdom is more than the world: God has more in store for the world than simply sustaining its best features. God's kingdom will transform this world, and so transcends this world. The kingdom cannot be secularized. Even as the church becomes more missional by learning to look beyond its own institutional life for the work of God in this world, it must not become so enamored with the world so as to think that the kingdom is the world. God's hope for the world surpasses even the world's own best hopes. The kingdom is not the world.

Having picked out God's kingdom in relation to the church and the world, we can begin to fill out our picture of God's kingdom. We will draw our content from the promises of God confirmed by and revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. We will structure this content around the language of the classic creeds: the kingdom is "the life of the world to come," "the resurrection of the body," and "the life everlasting." In other words, the kingdom of God is (1) New Creation, (2) Resurrection, and (3) Eternal Life.

#### (1) New Creation

The kingdom of God is the re-creation of the world. It is thus analogous to the creative work of God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. The kingdom of God is the new heavens and the new earth. It is new creation. Now the language of new creation is unfortunately not found in the Apostles' Creed, but it is implied in the last line of the Nicene Creed: "the life of the world to come." The reference to "world" (Greek: *cosmos*) gives us a sense of the big picture. We begin with this cosmic dimension in order to place our talk of personal destiny in its proper context. Christian hope is not just about individual life-after-death. Although it is included within eschatology, my individual destiny is not the whole story or even the central point. When personal hope is made the central point, eschatology all too easily becomes escapism. Rather, our personal hope fits within the larger story of God. The kingdom of God is the renewal of all things, the marriage of heaven and earth, the fulfillment of God's creative purposes. The kingdom of God does not replace but transforms God's good creation. This promise of transformation is revealed by Jesus, whose creatureliness is affirmed in his resurrection from the dead. And so here at the end we confirm what we have said from the beginning: that creation and

redemption are positively related. Redemption is the fulfillment of creation. Redemption is new creation.

By affirming the positive relationship between creation and redemption, we run immediately into a problem. How does this transformation occur? Is it a gradual sort of thing, or does it happen all at once? Or, to put the question in eschatological terms, when does this transformation occur? Has it already begun, or is it still to come? There is certainly Scriptural evidence in favor of both sides. The kingdom comes like a thief in the night, yet it also works like yeast in the dough. The kingdom is to come, yet is it already advancing violently.

What shall we do with this temporal tension in the New Testament? Some have tried to resolve it one way or the other. On one end of the spectrum, Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer famously spoke of a thoroughgoing eschatology, found especially in the teachings of the historical Jesus. This meant that the kingdom was for Jesus absolutely future, so that any talk of a present kingdom in the New Testament were later developments designed to deal with the disappointment surrounding Jesus' death and/or his delay in returning. Though Schweitzer considered this feature problematic, some theologians (such as Rudolf Bultmann and the early Karl Barth) attempted to make use of this perspective in their theology. The emphasis here is on the discontinuity between creation and redemption: God will redeem creation by his own radically new act. The advantage here is the critical limit set on all idolatrous claims to build the kingdom today. The disadvantage is that this view tends to empty history of its significance.

On the other end of the spectrum, C. H. Dodd famously spoke of a realized eschatology, in which the kingdom has already come. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, all things are fulfilled, including Jesus' own prophetic predictions. All that is left is the proclamation and expansion of this kingdom. Such an approach is often adopted by theologians to support either a high view of the church or a secularized kingdom-building work in the world. The emphasis is on the continuity between creation and redemption: God is redeeming creation in and through his creatures. The advantage here is the seriousness with which it takes the presence of the kingdom in Jesus Christ the King. The disadvantage is the temptation to co-opt the kingdom for our own ends, as well as the deeply problematic fact that the world remains quite rebellious against God's reign.

An attempt at mediation within this old debate was supplied by Oscar Cullman. He recommended the notion of an inaugurated eschatology. The kingdom has already but not yet come. It has already burst onto the scene in Jesus Christ, the turning point of history. And yet it awaits its final consummation at the end of all things. Although seemingly obvious, this view provides a conceptuality for keeping alive the temporal tension of Scripture.

This tension is expressed profoundly in Jesus' preaching: "The Kingdom of God is at hand." What does "at hand" mean? Does it mean it's here? Or does it mean it is coming? The answer is, "Yes." It's both here and still to come. This tension is held together in the very person of Jesus Christ, who as the incarnate Son of God fully embodies God's kingdom and invites his human brothers and sisters to participate in his kingdom, an incorporation which awaits its final consummation at the resurrection of the dead.

However, it is worth noting that merely saying "both/and" will not do as a theological procedure. One must think carefully about how to relate both aspects, in this case the presence and the future of the coming kingdom of God, and within that temporal dynamic the continuity and discontinuity between creation and redemption. One should keep alive this Scriptural tension, but

do so in a way that upholds the values found in the more extreme positions identified above. Extreme positions uncover deep insights that must be taken on board by any worthwhile mediating position. That's good advice in general, and is particularly important when discussing God's kingdom, for the kingdom is radically new and yet precisely as new it is the very fulfillment of God's creation. Nothing holds this tension of discontinuity and continuity together better than the promise of resurrection, to which we now turn.

## (2) Resurrection

The kingdom of God is the resurrection of the dead. It is thus analogous to the Father's raising of his son Jesus from the dead. Easter is the inauguration of the kingdom. In the bodily resurrection of Jesus we have a clear instance both of the surpassing of creation's own possibilities and God's re-affirmation of creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, God confirms his promise to not give up on his creation by giving to it something brand new. And so the continuity and discontinuity of creation and redemption are held together in Christ.

However, the risen Christ is more than an instance of our future hope. He is its basis. Only on the basis of the revelation of the crucified Jesus as the risen Lord do we have hope for our own resurrection from the dead. Following Paul's imagery: the risen Christ is the first-fruits, of which the resurrection of the dead is the harvest. Or, to follow another of Paul's image-sets: Jesus Christ is the firstborn from the dead, so many other sons and daughters will be revealed at the coming of God's kingdom. The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead fills Christian eschatology with a specific content and secure hope, which far exceed any vague wish for life-after-death.

In fact, as N. T. Wright succinctly puts it, Christian hope in resurrection is decidedly not about life after death, but rather about life after life-after-death. We know this is so because Jesus did not simply "die and go to heaven," but was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day rose again from the dead. He then ascended into heaven and has promised to return from there -- not to take us to heaven, but to bring heaven to earth. The king will bring the fullness of his kingdom here. The New Jerusalem will descend to earth, and we will reign with Christ forever. In order to be in such eternal fellowship with the risen son, human beings will be given new, resurrected bodies. These bodies will be different than the ones we are currently used to (discontinuity), yet these bodies will still be bodies (continuity). God in Christ has not given up on space, time and matter. God is so firmly pro-creation that he will not even leave it to its own "natural" end in decay and death. God puts death to death in the death of Christ, so that in him we might be raised from the dead.

All this talk of a future resurrection from the dead raises the question of an intermediate state. What happens in the meantime, between our death and resurrection? Where do we go when we die? This is the place where the immortality of the soul fits in. The belief that humans have a non-material identifying substance called a "soul" that survives one's natural death is not the same as belief in the resurrection of the dead. You can't turn "resurrection" into a code-word for the immortality of the soul. Immortality of the soul is not the centerpiece of Christian hope; resurrection of the body is.

However, theories about the souls can be helpful for imagining the intermediate state between death and resurrection. Such theories are not required by Christian faith, but neither are they strictly ruled out by it. Some suggest that resurrection faith is incompatible with belief in immortality, often in justifiable opposition to the bad habit in the Christian tradition of overplaying immortality at the expense of resurrection. But abuse does not bar use. Many of the

greatest thinkers in the Christian tradition have displayed the compatibility of resurrection and immortality. The key is to relentlessly subordinate all theoretical talk of an immortal soul to the sure faith in the resurrection of the dead. The idea of the immortality of the soul is only a theory to explain the intermediate state, and that's all it is. As such, immortality is a function of resurrection.

Two implications follow from this. First, immortality is not a natural attribute of the soul. Only God is immortal. Humans may have been created for immortality, but they were not created with immortality. Human immortality is a gift from God, and it ultimately comes in the form of a renewed bodily life at the resurrection. Any "immortality" prior to the resurrection is a temporary holding pattern, the preservation of our identity by God.

Second, whatever the soul is, it must not be thought of in abstraction from the body. The "soul" is simply a way of gesturing at the difference between a living body and a corpse. Soul means life. So we must not think of the intermediate state in terms of souls running around and doing things, as if our story just keeps on rolling. No, our life is hid with Christ in God. Whether God preserves our life-history only in his mind or also by means of a temporary form of bodily existence, we don't really know. The point is that an immortal soul awaiting the resurrection of the dead is not a ghost or an angel who might visit earth or meddle in its affairs. The human person, however preserved by God, awaits the breath of new life into a new bodily existence on the day of the Lord's return. And with the mention of the breath of new life, we come to our final point.

### (3) Eternal Life

The kingdom of God is the giving of eternal life. It is thus analogous to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit onto the church at Pentecost. Actually, in light of the forward-looking orientation of the Spirit's work, the analogy runs the other way: the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples is analogous to the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh. The indwelling of the Spirit is the foretaste and foreshadowing of the Spirit's gift of everlasting life to those raised in Christ. As Paul puts it, the Spirit is the down-payment of things to come. The Spirit fills and guides us now, but he will be the driving principle of our lives in the kingdom. So the resurrection of our bodies will not be just one last miracle to display the omnipotence of God, but is the indispensable means to the end of enjoying eternal fellowship with the risen Christ.

This living fellowship with Christ by the Spirit marks the completion of our sanctification. According to the various Christian traditions, this completion is referred to as glorification, the beatific vision, or deification. Although each term understands eternal life differently, all of them contain the crucial element of seeing. The crucial distinction between now and then is the means by which we are sanctified: it is no longer by faith, but by sight. "We shall be like him because we shall see him as he truly is" (1 Jn 3:2). In the kingdom we will share in God's eternal life because Jesus will be revealed. It is thus no coincidence that the last book of the Bible is called Revelation, for it is by revelation that God achieves the completion of his work in us.

But does completion mean conclusion? Does eternal life mean the story is simply over? Is the coming kingdom a denouement that just goes on and on and on? In other words, will heaven be boring? This is a common question, and one can see why it arises. But it betrays a misunderstanding both of God's future and ours. On the one hand, an eternity spent worshipping God will not be boring because of the inexhaustible riches of God's triune life. Maybe church is boring, but God isn't. God will never run out of aspects of his identity and character to reveal to

us in spirit and in truth. On the other hand, worship in the kingdom will be expressed not only in our absolute love of God but also in our relative love of one another. The twofold love command will still apply in the kingdom; the only difference is that it will always be obeyed. So in the kingdom we are not enveloped back into God but rather we have fellowship with God in his outward movement among his people. As the vision of both Ezekiel and John attest, the river in the New Jerusalem flows out of the city. The only difference is that in John's New Jerusalem, the river does not flow out of the temple for there is no temple. "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Rev 21:22). There is no separate place for worship because in the kingdom we will worship God as we walk outward with him toward our fellow creatures. It is for this kingdom that we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come."

Any thoughts?

Do you agree that the kingdom of God is the best category around which to organize eschatological reflection? Why or why not?

Is it a good thing to distinguish the kingdom from the church and from the world? What happens when the kingdom is too closely identified with either?

When thinking about God's new creation, do you tend to emphasize discontinuity or continuity? Do you have a reason for your tendency? How can these best be held together without making recourse to a simplistic both/and appeal?

If Jesus is the basis of our future hope, what other implications does his resurrection have for eschatological reflection?

Do Christians tend to conflate resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul? What happens when we do this? Do we have to choose between them? Or are they compatible, perhaps in the way I have sketched or in some other way?

Have you ever asked or been asked to question, "Will heaven be boring?" How have you answered this question? How will you answer this question in the future?

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