

The Apostle's Creed, Its History and Meaning

by Dr. Kerry Irish

The Apostle's Creed is one of the great declarations of the Christian faith. Its original expression dates to the second century A.D. Church tradition holds that each of the twelve Apostles contributed one of the dozen major themes to the creed, thus the title. In the late 4th century, the creed was referred to in various church documents. In its modern form it dates to the eighth century.¹

Because of its brief yet powerful message, the creed was and is an important tool for the teaching of basic Christian doctrine. In the centuries when writing was rare and expensive, the creed could be memorized. Today, when the problem with the written word is not too little, but too much, too much that is either a waste of time, vulgar, or blasphemous, the power of a memorized creed lay in its reminder of the majesty of God, who he is, and our relationship to Him. Some Christians object to creeds claiming the Bible is all they need. The mistake in this thinking is the idea that a Biblical creed is something outside the Bible when in fact it is a memorable and valuable expression of Biblical truths that help us explain what we believe.² Indeed, the Apostle Peter tells us to be prepared to give an account of our faith.³ One way to prepare is to

¹Michael Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 25.

²Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 18-22.

³1 Peter 3:15, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you..."

memorize the Apostle's Creed as many Christians did in the early centuries of the Christian faith.⁴ Knowing the Apostle's Creed helps us explain the Christian faith; and saying the Apostle's Creed is an act of worship that strengthens the believer for the trials of the day. Finally, one may consider the wisdom of the American Founding Fathers, who, in declaring their independence from Great Britain, followed this Biblical principle of explaining their ideas in a creed when Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence:

When in the course of human events it become necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separation.

Thus, Americans declare their ideals in the Declaration, and Christians similarly declare their Christian faith when reciting the Apostle's Creed.

What, then, does the Apostle's Creed teach? What should Christians believe?

A common English translation of the Apostle's Creed states:⁵

⁵ This English form of the Apostle's Creed may be found on the website of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And Sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy catholic Church, the Communion of the Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting. Amen.

Given the historical and theological significance of the Apostle's Creed, Christians should endeavor to thoroughly understand its meaning. I will explain it point by point.

I believe...

What does the word believe mean? It does not mean that one knows something as in two plus two equals four. And it does not mean mere assent to a set of ideas. The Apostle Paul described belief or faith, in part, as hope, "We

have fixed our hope on the living God.”⁶ So there is an element of hope in Christian faith. In addition, believing in the Christian triune God leads to obedience, a willingness to follow the path of life, the principles of faith, that the Bible sets out. Theologian Michael Bird has written,

Faith is primarily a way of trust and fidelity, a willingness to receive from God what He freely offers, and thereafter a disposition to act in a certain way when confronted with certain things [such as choices between right and wrong]. Faith is ultimately our trusting response to what God has done for us and promised us in the gospel, which in turn pervades every aspect of our lives. Faith is not an abstract virtue but is directed toward a person, Jesus Christ. Faith is our cleaving and clinging to Christ. Faith is the act where we say to Christ, “Save me for I am yours.”⁷

The person who believes that assenting to the idea that Christ is Lord, then behaves as if they had never known Christ, is a victim of poor theology and is following an ancient heresy known as antinomianism. Paul rejected such theology in Romans chapter six: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”⁸ In the book of James we read “Even so faith, if it has no works (acts of faith, obedience) is dead, being by itself.” And the apostle John wrote, “For this

⁶1Timothy 4:10

⁷Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 46. Psalm 119:94.

⁸Romans 6:1,2.

is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not burdensome [we want to do them, to obey].”⁹

...in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and earth.

The Father is the head of the Christian trinity – the three-part God.

There is no single scripture that defines the trinity.¹⁰ However, there are so many verses that imply the trinity that to deny its existence creates greater theological problems than affirming its reality. For our purposes, Jesus said, “I and the Father are One.”¹¹ God the Father revealed to Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”¹² And Luke 1:35 connects all three members of the trinity in the birth of Jesus Christ, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”¹³

In addition to his triune nature, God has always existed, he is both omnipotent and omniscient. This means his power and knowledge are without limit. He has made both heaven and earth. There was a time when they did not

⁹John 5:3.

¹⁰Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 58.

¹¹John 10:30.

¹²Matthew 16:16-17.

¹³Luke 1:35.

exist, when time itself did not exist. God called them into existence.¹⁴ He is not part of his creation, he is not in the trees or the rocks or the sea as those who worship those created things (pantheists) believe. Thus, to worship them, or anything he has created, is a sin. Indeed, to so worship is a violation of the very first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.”¹⁵ Since God had created all things, all things are subject to his authority.¹⁶ He determines what is right, what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. At the end of days, He has promised to uphold the righteous and destroy the wicked. Ironically, many modern people reject Christianity because it allows for evil in the world, “a good god would not allow such evil to exist,” they claim. Tragically, these people miss the point that God is patient, unwilling that anyone should experience permanent death. They lack God’s perspective that physical death in this world is not as horrible as spiritual death in the world to come. Jesus himself said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”¹⁷ In the Twentieth century, theologian Karl Barth, following the New Testament, especially the book of Romans, has magnificently declared and explained the separateness of God from his creation, and the utter dependence of mankind

¹⁴These doctrines are well explained in several Bible passages. Among the most important are Genesis chapters one and two, the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John, II Corinthians 13:14. Genesis 1:26-27 in which the pronoun for God is plural. Finally, Ephesians 3:14-21 clearly links the three persons of the godhead: Father, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit, together as one.

¹⁵Romans 1:20-25. Exodus 20:3-6.

¹⁶1 Corinthians 15:27; Hebrews 2:8.

¹⁷Mathew 10:28, New American Standard Version.

on His grace for salvation. So, if you are angry that the world we live in is so imperfect, so unjust, and is overrun with evil, God agrees with you; and He has promised to bring an end to this world and inaugurate a world that is ruled by Jesus Christ. And in Christ's Kingdom righteousness dwells. ¹⁸

And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord.

Both the New Testament and the Apostle's Creed teach that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, and the only Lord of men and women.¹⁹ His is the only name by which human beings may receive forgiveness of sins and restoration to the intended close relationship with God.²⁰ Though the Bible describes Jesus as God's son, He too has always existed. The triune God has always existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The most obvious sense in which Jesus is the Son of the Father is in the fact that he set aside some aspect of his divine nature when he came to earth for the purpose of restoring human beings to their intended relationship with the Father.²¹ In this mission, Jesus defers to his Father, and refers to himself as the Son.²² We should do no less. It may be

¹⁸Romans 3:9-18. Revelation 2.

¹⁹John 3:16-18; John 1:14-18.

²⁰Acts 4:10-12.

²¹Again, the first 18 verses of John's gospel are definitive as to Christ's divine nature. Philippians 2:7 speaks to the fact in being born a man, the Son of God gave up some aspect of his relationship to God the Father.

²²Matthew 16:16.

helpful to remember a point that C.S. Lewis made about difficult aspects of Christianity:

Reality, [the way the world is], in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed [imagined]. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It is a religion you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up. It has just that queer [in the old-fashioned sense of the word: odd] twist about it that real things have. So let us leave behind all these boys' philosophies - these over-simple answers. The problem is not simple [injustice in the world, death, pain, etc.] and the answer is not going to be simple either.²³

And the Apostle Paul admitted that many things about Jesus and the Christian faith are difficult, confusing. He wrote that in the next life we will better understand, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known."²⁴

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost

The conception of Jesus Christ was miraculous, he had no human father. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, caused Mary to be with

²³C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour and Company, Inc., n.d.), 36.

²⁴1 Corinthians 13:12

child. Jesus' humanity, then, came from his mother's side of the family; His divinity, in His human existence, came from the Holy Spirit.²⁵ In this way, The Bible tells us he was not half human and half divine, but was fully human and fully divine. The early church wrestled with this mystery for centuries. Finally, at the council of Nicea in 325 A.D., the leaders of the church, having considered all the scriptures, traditions, and logical arguments, decided, as the Nicene Creed poetically asserts:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ the word of God, God from God, light from light, life from life, the only-begotten Son, first-born of all creatures, begotten of the Father before all ages, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh and dwelt among men; and who suffered and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the Father and shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.²⁶

So, the Scriptures and church tradition assert the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Born of the Virgin Mary.

Just as the early church argued over the divinity of Christ, some believed that he was not truly a man. But John 1:14, "And the Word [Jesus] became flesh,

²⁵Luke 1:35.

²⁶Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume I: to A.D. 1500* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 155.

and dwelt among us,” is clear, as are the numerous scriptures that refer to his human qualities such as fatigue, anger, sorrow, pity, love, exasperation and, ultimately, death.²⁷

The obvious question concerns Mary’s virginity. How do we know she was a virgin? There is no scientific iron-clad answer to this question. But consider this. Joseph, Mary’s husband, when he learned she was pregnant, decided that she must have broken her engagement vows. He determined to quietly put her aside, to refuse to marry her. Most Jewish men would have done the same thing. But an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and explained to him that Mary was special, she had not lied, and she had not been unfaithful. From that point on, Joseph did as the Lord commanded him.²⁸ This is powerful testimony. Consider too, that Mary was at the crucifixion of her son. If the virgin birth was a hoax, a lie, would she not have confessed this to Pontius Pilate in the hope that such a declaration would save the life of her son? If she so confessed to Pilate that Jesus birth was not special, that he was deluded, perhaps even unstable, then both Jews and Romans could easily have made Mary’s confession known to Jesus’ followers and the people, and thus deflated Jesus’s messiah movement. This would have been much preferred to making Him a martyr. But what did Mary do? She was silent, she did not move, she believed, and she watched her son die on the cross.²⁹ This, too, is a very

²⁷John 4:6; John 19:28; Matthew 4:11; Luke 23:26, and Matthew 26:38, among many others.

²⁸Matthew 1: 18-25.

²⁹John 19:25.

compelling confession of faith, and it must have been a powerful testimony to the disciples and many other people who knew Jesus and believed in Him. Indeed, Mary must have been a very convincing witness to these incredible events.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

Secular history attests to the Judean administration of the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate from 26-36 A.D.³⁰ Only Pilate had the authority to put criminals to death. In Jesus' case, however, it was Jewish leaders who wished to get rid of a man they deemed a false messiah and blasphemer that led to capital charges against Him. These leaders accused Jesus of inciting rebellion against Caesar. Though Pilate was unconvinced of Jesus' guilt, he washed his hands of the affair and ordered Him crucified to ingratiate himself with the Jews.³¹

Was crucified dead and buried

Shortly after the trial, Jesus was taken outside the city to the place of execution. He was nailed to a cross and executed by soldiers who did this work on a regular basis. They were not amateurs. Josephus, a non-biblical source,

³⁰Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 56.

³¹Luke 23:22. John 19:4, 6.

testifies to the execution of a Jewish rebel named Jesus in the reign of Pilate.³² Given that the soldiers themselves would have been subject to the death penalty had they failed, to believe that Jesus did not die – and thus the resurrection is explained as a hoax, is to reject common sense and the written record for some other article of faith. So Jesus was dead. Indeed, the Roman centurion in charge of the execution affirmed to Pilate that Jesus was dead.³³ And all of Jesus' disciples believed him to be dead. They had not understood his references to his resurrection.³⁴ One of them, Joseph of Arimathea, even asked Pilate for Jesus' body that it might be properly prepared and buried. This was done. All four of the gospels attest to this fact.³⁵

He descended into Hell

This is a difficult passage of the Apostle's Creed as the concept of hell is often misunderstood. Indeed, I am quite certain that most of those who read this will be surprised to learn that those who die without faith in Christ do not initially go to hell. Hell is the ultimate destination for Satan and his angels, and human beings who finally reject Christ's offer of salvation. In Revelation twenty, no one, with the possible exception of the Beast and the False Prophet, is consigned to hell until the millennial reign is completed and the great White

³²Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18:3 (

³³Mark 15: 44-45.

³⁴Mark 16:14; Luke 24-11.

³⁵John 19:38; Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:43-47;

Throne Judgement is imminent. Before Christ ascended to heaven, the dead went to Hades (Greek) or, in Hebrew, Sheol. Hades is divided into two parts. Those who have died in faith go to a place of rest in Hades often referred to as Abraham's Bosom; those who have died without faith go to a place of torment. In Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man, Lazarus is comforted by Abraham while the rich man who had refused to comfort the poor Lazarus while both men lived is in agony. Indeed, in Hades the rich man can see Lazarus and Abraham in the distance, but his cries cannot be addressed for there is a "a great chasm fixed" between the two places in Hades. The version of the Apostle's Creed I have used mistakenly uses the word hell instead of Hades. Other versions of the creed are better translations at this point. Once the Great White Throne Judgment has taken place, death and Hades are thrown into the Lake of Fire which is hell. Satan and his angels are sent there, as are those whose name "was not found written in the book of life."³⁶ In summary, when Jesus was crucified no one was in hell; He did not go there. Jesus descended to Hades and according to Peter preached to those who were being punished. This accomplished, he led the faithful who were with Abraham to heaven.³⁷ In addition to making sense of these and many scriptures, this explanation makes sense of Jesus' words to one of the thieves executed with Him. This man had rebuked the other crucified criminal for challenging Jesus to save all three of them; confessed his sin, and then asked Jesus to "remember me when You

³⁶Revelation 20:11-15.

³⁷1 Peter 3:19-22. See Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 145, for an explanation of this issue.

come in Your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “I say to you, today, you shall be with me in paradise.”³⁸ Today! This day! Where is Jesus going upon His death? To Hades, to Abraham’s Bosom which is paradise. The thief joined Him there. How could the thief join Jesus in heaven “this day,” if Jesus had gone to Hades? No, the forgiven thief went with Jesus to Abraham’s Bosom in Hades. From there, as Peter said, He rose again on the third day and is now “at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven.” And Paul agrees with him. “When He Ascended On High, He Led Captive A Host Of Captives...Now this expression, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?”³⁹ So, Jesus Christ, after his death, descended into Hades, not hell. There, he released the captives, the faithful, including Abraham, Lazarus, and the former thief on the cross to rise to heaven. Since the ascension of Jesus Christ, Christians, upon their death, go to be with Christ in heaven.⁴⁰ Those who die without faith in Christ continue to go to Hades.

The Third Day he rose again from the dead

Jesus died about 3:00 p.m. on a Friday, he rose from the dead the following Sunday.⁴¹ In the Jewish system of counting, any portion of a day is regarded as a day. So, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday constitute three days.

³⁸Luke 23:41-43.

³⁹Ephesians 4:8-9.

⁴⁰Philippians 1:23.

⁴¹Luke 23:44, Mark 14:12, Luke 24:1.

This is important because Jesus himself predicted he would be dead three days, “Destroy this temple [His Body] and in three days I will raise it up.”⁴² Moreover, it appears the prophecy of Hosea 6:1-3 was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hosea wrote, “He will raise us up on the third day that we may live before Him.” It is probably this scripture that Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 15:4: “...and that He was buried, and that He was raised, on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Now we come to the crux of the Christian faith, “He rose again from the dead.” If it were not for this Biblical claim, Christianity would be little different from the rest of the world’s religions. But Christians claim to believe in, and worship, a savior who was crucified and rose again from the dead. Paul makes this doctrine central to Christianity, “...and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain... you are still in your sins... Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”⁴³ Christianity is not primarily a life-improvement religion; one should not be a Christian in the belief it will make one a better person. Christianity is a life-changing religion. The true Christian believer becomes a new person that will live forever because of his or her relationship with the everlasting Son of God Jesus Christ. This new creature will progress in faith and holiness, but that is the fruit of faith, not the reason for it. As C.S. Lewis has said, one should become a Christian

⁴²John 2:19

⁴³1 Corinthians 15:14-19.

because it is true.⁴⁴ Ultimately, one cannot prove the resurrection of Christ in the way one proves a scientific fact. On the other hand, there is substantial evidence for it. It is not my purpose to prove the resurrection of Christ. It is my purpose to explain the meaning and significance of the Apostle's Creed. As for me, I love the old hymn *He Lives*, for it triumphantly asserts, "I know that He is living, whatever men may say." So, Christians believe that Jesus Christ rose again from the dead, and in doing so made it possible that we too might follow Him to heaven and the life eternal. It is useless to claim that Jesus' resurrection is impossible; that is precisely why Christians are impressed with it. They know that it took a miracle from God for the resurrection to happen; even the disciples did not think it would happen, or had happened, until confronted with the risen Christ.⁴⁵ That it has happened changed the meaning of world history.

He ascended into Heaven

Christians tend to take the ascension of Jesus Christ for granted. They ought not do so. The ascension introduces the everlasting work of Jesus Christ for His church. Facile critics of the Christian faith, and perhaps some naïve Christians, understand the risen Christ ascending into heaven as going somewhere in the clouds. The Bible does not tell us that once Jesus

⁴⁴C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour and Company, Inc., 1952), 118-119.

⁴⁵Luke 24:11, Luke 24: 36-49.

disappeared into the clouds that is where he remained. It does tell us that he went to be with the Father. And where the Father is, existed before the earth was created. Indeed, Heaven is not part of this universe at all.

Once Jesus departed this earth, He sent the comforter, the Holy Spirit. Indeed, had He not left the earth, the Spirit could not come.⁴⁶ As the gospel of John claims in several places, Jesus sent the Spirit to instruct, inspire, and comfort the Church of Christ (believers).⁴⁷ Finally, The Spirit of God brought power, power that enabled the faithful to live lives rich in the triumph of faith over sin, and the strength to be witnesses for Jesus Christ in the world.⁴⁸ The ascension then put Jesus Christ in Heaven, and the Holy Spirit in the world as the power of the church, the Bride of Christ.

Sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty

Psalm 110 reveals the significance of this phrase concerning the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father. David Wrote:

The Lord says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

⁴⁶John 16:7

⁴⁷John 14:16-17, 26, and John 15:26.

⁴⁸Luke 24:49.

The Lord will stretch forth your strong scepter from Zion,
saying, Rule in the midst of your enemies.”

The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind,
“You are priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

The Lord is at your right hand;
He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.

He will judge among the nations,
He will fill them with corpses,

He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.
He will drink from the brook by the wayside;

Therefore He will lift up His head.
Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ rules the universe from this place at the right
hand of God the Father.

What does the reigning of Christ from the Father’s right hand mean for
the Christian? One day, God’s will shall be executed on Earth just as it is in
Heaven. The Second Century church father Polycarp, who was Bishop of
Smyrna and was martyred for his faith, wrote:

‘Wherefore, girding up your loins,’ ‘serve the Lord in fear’ and truth, as
those who have forsaken the vain, empty talk and error of the multitude,

and ‘believed in Him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory,’ and a throne at His right hand. To Him all things in heaven and on earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes as the judge of the living and the dead. His blood will God require of those who do not believe in Him.⁴⁹

In short, we are to so live our lives that every aspect of our being is under the lordship of Jesus Christ: our work, our families, our entertainment, and our relationships. In a world that is hostile to the Christian faith, this is difficult; but it is no more difficult than the challenge Polycarp faced: he was burned alive at the stake for his Christian faith in 155 A.D.

From Thence He shall come to judge the quick (living) and the dead

In late 12th century England, many of the people of the realm chafed under the harsh rule of John, the brother of the revered King Richard. The great King was away on crusade in the Holy Land. Many of Richard’s people yearned for his return and the reestablishment of justice and peace. In the same way, Christians believe that Jesus Christ will one day return to earth and seize control from Satan whom Paul calls the “the god of this world.”⁵⁰ Jesus will then establish his kingdom, a kingdom in which truth and justice are supreme. Jesus himself will rule. This Christ led kingdom will last one

⁴⁹*Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, 2:1, compiled by David Robert Palmer, May 2015 edition, <http://bibletranslation.wspalmer-translation/>.

⁵⁰II Corinthians 4:4.

thousand years, thus its name “the millennial kingdom.” In this millennial reign the people of earth will experience life the way God intended, and then, near the end of it, God permits a Satan led rebellion that culminates in The Great White Throne Judgment. At this judgment, described in Revelation 20: 11-15, the living and the dead, along with Satan and his angels are judged.

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.⁵¹

The Bible instructs Christians to look forward to the return of Christ to earth and the establishment of his Kingdom. Christians often struggle with this instruction. They do not want to give up their hopes and dreams for this life: love, marriage, family, and the accomplishments that lead to the respect of their fellow man. Then too, the idea that life is a series of experiences – the

⁵¹Revelation 20:11-15.

bucket list – has also infected Christians. But Scripture is clear; Christians are to eagerly anticipate and pray for the return of Jesus Christ to earth. Even the most important of Christian prayers, the one Jesus himself taught us, contains the yearning for Christ's return,

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come (why?) so that, thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.⁵²

The proper Christian attitude and response toward the return of Christ is one of preaching the gospel (Matthew 24:14), enduring persecution (Revelation 1:9), inspiring (1 Thessalonians 4:18) others to faith and anticipation of Christ's return, remembering (I Corinthians 11:26) Jesus Christ and his promises, and finally the cultivation of a sure and vibrant hope in Christ's return, the maranatha (Lord come – return to earth - quickly) of I Corinthians 16:22.⁵³ It may be helpful to think of our heavenly life with Christ as vastly more fulfilling and interesting than our present life. The cartoonish concept of a heaven in which one floats around on a cloud with nothing to do is moronic, deceitful, and perhaps one of the great blasphemies men have contrived.

I believe in the Holy Ghost

The Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity. Tragically, there are and have been those who discount the deity – the divine nature - of the

⁵²Matthew 6:9, 10. KJV.

⁵³These concepts are given more explanation Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 174-175.

Holy Spirit. But in the same way the Church established the deity of Jesus Christ at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., it also affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit in the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.⁵⁴ Moreover, there are numerous Scriptures that declare the divine nature of the Holy Spirit. The Bible affirms that God raised Jesus from the dead.⁵⁵ But the Scriptures also state that the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead.⁵⁶ Finally, one cannot blaspheme anything but God; and in Matthew 12:28-31, Jesus himself claims that His power to cast out demons comes from the Holy Spirit, and that should anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, that sin shall not be forgiven. Not only is the Holy Spirit the third person of the triune God, to deny this is an unforgivable sin.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to be with, to indwell, those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. Jesus himself described the work of the Holy Spirit when he said to His disciples,

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth...But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, 163, 164.

⁵⁵Acts 2:24, Romans 10:9, I Peter 1:21 and many others.

⁵⁶Romans 8:11.

⁵⁷John 14: 16 and 26.

The coming of the Holy Spirit in this deeply personal manner had long been foretold and hoped for. Moses himself expressed the hope that the Spirit of God would one day come to all believers, “Would [I wish] that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them.”⁵⁸ And the Prophet Joel, in one of the more quoted passages of the Old Testament, declared, “I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”⁵⁹ The Old and New testaments proclaim the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. The Holy Spirit was the energizing force in the creation of the world, the giving of life, and in the renewal of the world at the end of days.⁶⁰ Theologian Gordon Fee has aptly written that the “Holy Spirit” is “God’s empowering presence.”⁶¹

I Believe in the Holy catholic church

Michael Bird has rightly remarked that the Apostle’s Creed “was written by the church and for the church and even mentions the church as one of the main beliefs of the [Christian] faith.”⁶² The word catholic means “universal” and did not originally refer to the “Catholic church.” The use of the word to refer to the Catholic church, headed in Rome, developed over the first two centuries after

⁵⁸Numbers, 11:29. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 179.

⁵⁹Joel, 2:29.

⁶⁰Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 189.

⁶¹Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5.

⁶²Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 193.

Christ and was not commonly so used until end of the second century.⁶³ Thus, the Apostle's Creed, as used by Christians who are not Catholic, refers to the universal church, the body of all those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and "the source of eternal salvation."⁶⁴

What is the church? Let us begin with what it is not. The church is not the place where one goes once or twice a month on Sunday to be uplifted by music, conversation, or a good sermon. Unfortunately, many Christians have this modern notion of church. And as many modern things are, this idea of church is a pale imitation of God's original intent. Michael Bird, again, has superbly captured the true definition of the church:

...the church is the visible gathering of the faithful for the representation of Christ's presence to the world...the church is the people, not the steeple. The church is not the pews nor the pulpit, not the podcasts nor the programs...the church is not where we meet or what we do; it is who we are.⁶⁵

And there is power in the church. Jesus said "For where two or three have gathered in my name, I am there in their midst. So Jesus is with the community of believers in a more powerful way than He is with the one person. Then too, He has promised that when we pray together in His will those

⁶³Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, 130.

⁶⁴Hebrews 5:9.

⁶⁵Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 194.

prayers will be answered in the affirmative.⁶⁶ This leads to my final point regarding the church. Christianity was never intended to be a solitary religion. It is not the faith of the individualist. Christianity is a relationship with Jesus Christ and the brothers and sisters one gains as a member of His church. Cyprian of Carthage wrote in the third century, “He can no longer have God for his father, who has not the church for his mother!” In short, “we go to church to rehearse, to celebrate, and to better understand the drama of redemption that reaches us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁷

The Communion of Saints...

There was a time in the western world when Christianity was the dominant world view and cultural force. That time has long since passed. Christians now live in the so-called postmodern and post-Christian era. The prevailing world view is secular and highly antagonistic to Christianity. People of this mindset see Christians as, at best, quaintly odd, or, at worst, opposed to almost every aspect of the modern view of life. Christians view sexual freedom as sin, believe in an absolute right and wrong, are committed to personal responsibility for one’s behavior as opposed to the state’s responsibility to see all human beings conform to the prevailing ideology. Consequently, many modern people see Christianity as one of the important, if not the primary, obstacles to achieving

⁶⁶Matthew 18: 19, 20.

⁶⁷Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 195.

the postmodern vision of conformity, a conformity they believe that is not only moral, but also a utilitarian necessity. Ironically, this was precisely the situation the early church faced as it confronted the deeply pagan Roman empire. Christians at that time quite naturally found comfort in communion amongst each other as they faced a hostile world. As it so happened, this communion was more than a necessary expedient, it was commanded by Jesus Christ himself. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”⁶⁸ Thus, the body of Christians believers is like a human body in which all of the parts contribute to the whole. We each have our work to do as part of the community of believers. And, of course, in times of persecution as these, we comfort and strengthen each other against the trials that will come. One last crucial point that is comforting if well understood. The body of believers is not confined to the living but includes those who have died in Christ as well.

The Forgiveness of Sins...

Human beings object, at some basic level, when told that they are sinful. We don't want to hear it; we criticize pastors who insist on telling us we have offended God. And yet, remove the doctrine that all human beings have sinned, and one strikes at the vitals of Christianity, one proclaims the death of Christ a

⁶⁸Romans 12:4, 5.

waste, and His message a lie. For Christ died to save sinners, not the righteous, and all human beings have sinned.⁶⁹ Paul tells us in Romans that the result of sin is both physical and spiritual death. The Apostle wrote, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and “...the wages [the result] of sin is death.”⁷⁰ But Jesus Christ, unaccountably loving human beings even in their sin, has not left us to die. The very next line in Romans reads, “But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁷¹ The great question of life, then, is: how does one obtain this free of gift salvation from Jesus Christ? First, we must be willing to confess that we are sinners.⁷² This is why the evil power of this world, known as Satan, works so hard to make that confession repulsive to proud human beings. Satan knows that if we confess Jesus Christ as Lord, he loses. After confessing our sins, we must proclaim the divinity, the Lordship of Jesus of Christ. Paul again explains, “...that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”⁷³

It may be helpful to note that when healing human beings in His earthly ministry, Jesus often said to those being healed that He had forgiven their sins,

⁶⁹| Timothy 1:15. | John 1:10.

⁷⁰Romans 3:23; 6:23.

⁷¹Romans 6:23.

⁷²| John1:9.

⁷³Romans 10:9,10.

not that they were healed.⁷⁴ They could see or feel the healing, but Jesus wanted them to know that His power to heal stemmed from the fact that He was the Son of God; and also possessed the far more important power to forgive sins. Healing the body was and is helpful to live a more comfortable and productive life; forgiving sins leads to eternal life. Jesus made this clear to the obstinate Pharisees when, having healed a paralytic by saying, “friend your sins are forgiven you,” the Pharisees responded He had blasphemed for only God can forgive sins. Jesus replied, “Which is easier, to say ‘Your sins have been forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man [Jesus] has authority on earth to forgive sins,” He told the paralytic to get up [for he was healed] and go home.” The man did. And all who saw this were astonished saying, “We have seen remarkable things today.” So, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has the authority to forgive sins. A life of faith begins with a simple confession to Christ asking for help, for forgiveness of sins. And if we do this, John tells us, “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”⁷⁵

The Resurrection of the body

The Bible asserts, and the Apostle’s Creed teaches, that one’s earthly body will both die and one day be resurrected. Perhaps the most dramatic of the

⁷⁴Matthew 9:2-8

⁷⁵John 1:9.

Scriptures is Revelation 20:13, “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them...” And, as we have seen, the Lord Jesus himself physically rose from the dead; all four gospels proclaim His earthly body was no longer in the tomb.⁷⁶ And Paul said that the resurrection of Jesus was the “first fruits of those who are asleep.”⁷⁷ And in the very next verses Paul tells us that all of us will be made alive again, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”⁷⁸ Paul proclaims in unmistakable language: “He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies...”⁷⁹ But the resurrection of your mortal body is just the beginning. That body will be transformed. In one of the more moving passages Paul wrote, we learn our bodies were:

... sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.⁸⁰

Though we will have a new body, our friends and family will recognize us. Paul wrote in another of his poetic passages, and here the King James version is unsurpassed, “For now I see through a glass darkly; but then [after my

⁷⁶Matthew, 28:6. Mark, 16:6. Luke 24:3. John, 20: 1,2.

⁷⁷1 Corinthians 15: 20.

⁷⁸1 Corinthians 15: 22.

⁷⁹Romans, 8:11.

⁸⁰1 Corinthians 15: 42-44.

resurrection] face to face: now I know in part. But then shall I know even as I am known.”⁸¹

The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is why Christians preserve the body after death for they know God is not finished with it. Pagans, not Christians, burn the body for most of them have no faith in the resurrection of the earthly body. Not surprisingly, as Christianity declines in the western world there is a corresponding return to Pagan practices even if those so returning are not aware of this phenomenon. Cremation in the last century has become quite fashionable especially among those who reject the Christian faith.

And the life everlasting

In our attempt to understand eternal life, the first thing we must comprehend is that mortal and fallen human beings cannot fully grasp the idea of “life everlasting.” Indeed, this aspect of the Christian faith is often mocked and ridiculed. Who among us has not seen heaven depicted as people riding about on clouds with nothing to do? How boring. This childish depiction was intended to be uninviting, unworthy of the trouble to get there. Incredibly, otherwise intelligent people hold this view or something very close to it. But the Scriptures are clear that heaven is a very solid place, where people in resurrection bodies dwell. It is the place of the New Jerusalem, and the New Jerusalem is the center of the renewed earth. Jesus reigns over this new earth

⁸¹1 Corinthians 13:12. Now I see through a glass darkly, as if I have dark sunglasses on, I do not see, I do not understand the things of this world fully. But then, in heaven, the dark glasses will be removed, and I will both see clearly, and understand fully.

from this holy city, and those who have entered this new heaven and earth serve the Lord there.⁸² I believe resurrected Christians will have meaningful work to do. It is important to understand that resurrection does not mean omniscient or omnipotent. Only God is God. The resurrected Christians will still have things to learn, the universe will still have need of care, just as the Garden of Eden was to have been cared for by Adam and Eve.⁸³ Yet we will have time to rejoice, time to have fellowship with friends and family, and to meet new friends. C.S. Lewis has even imagined that we be reunited with our beloved pets.⁸⁴ Ultimately, these thoughts on heaven are a very pale representation of what heaven will be like. My limited intelligence cannot behold or contain the majesty of God. How, then, could I, a mere mortal, imagine the splendor of God's dwelling place? Paul was right when he said, "Now I see through a glass darkly..."⁸⁵

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⁸² Peter, 3:13. Isaiah 65:17-23. See also Revelation chapters 21 and 22.

⁸³ Genesis, 2:15.

⁸⁴ Lewis considers this question in both *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain*.

⁸⁵ I Corinthians, 13:12.

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