

Understanding The Apostle's Creed

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

This creed is called the Apostles' Creed not because it was produced by the apostles themselves but because it contains a brief summary of their teachings. It sets forth their doctrine "in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassable brevity, in beautiful order, and with liturgical solemnity." In its present form it is dated no later than the fourth century. More than any other Christian creed, it may justly be called a universal symbol of faith.¹

Background and History

As the Christian church spread throughout the Roman world in the first century, and as the first leaders died out, there was a practical need for local churches to have a basic statement of beliefs. As false teachers began to bring in strange ideas, Christians needed to know "Just what is it that we believe?"

Some of these churches had a few books of the New Testament, perhaps some of Paul's letters or one of the four Gospels. But none of the churches had all the New Testament. They needed a standard to judge whether a teaching was truth, or heresy.

The early Christians also realized that new people didn't have to know everything before they could be baptized and accepted as believers. How much should they know and accept before being admitted into the church? This was another reason that early churches wanted a brief statement of what they believed to be most essential.

A summary of apostolic teaching

The Creed was useful in several ways:

- The Creed was a public statement of faith, a standardized way in which new people could confess their faith in Jesus Christ.
- The Creed anchored Christian faith to a tradition, to make it difficult for people or churches to be led astray by strange doctrines.
- The Creed was a preaching and teaching tool, giving an outline for further discipleship.
- The Creed was memorized through frequent repetition, which helped the many believers who could not read.
- The Creed provided a doctrinal basis for different churches to accept one another, and to reject those who did not accept the basic truths.

The Bible itself contains brief creed-like statements (1 Cor. 8:6; 15:3-4; 1 Tim. 3:16). The early church leaders also wrote short creeds, perhaps as baptism ceremonies. These eventually were recited by congregations in their worship services. ²

A Basic Summary of Essential Christian Doctrine

The Apostle's Creed is short, but it is amazingly complete, succinctly summarizing all the basic essentials of the Christian faith. In our time, it has been referred to as the original "Sinner's Prayer". In other words, any person who recites the Creed sincerely believing in what it says is confessing orthodox faith; as far as basic Christian doctrine is concerned, they are a believer in the biblical sense of the word.

It is important to remember that the Creed is not just a formal doctrinal statement, but a personal confession of faith. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means "I believe." It is recited aloud together in the church, which expresses the universal or *catholic* nature of the faith, but the words of the Creed are personal and individual, "I believe...". The Creed is often recited just before taking communion.

Deciphering the wording of the Creed

Q: What do we mean when we say, "I believe in the holy catholic church"?

The word "catholic" in the creed is spelled with a small "c", which simply means "universal". Remember, the creed was in use before there was any such thing as the Roman Catholic Church (with a capital "c"). When we say, "I believe in the holy catholic church" we are simply saying that we believe God has only one church (Ephesians 4:4 etc).

Some people are also put off by the words "holy catholic church." The word catholic comes from the Greek words kat' holos, literally meaning "according to the whole," or in actual use, worldwide or universal. The word catholic became part of the Creed before "catholic" became associated with the Roman church, and many Protestant churches use the Creed with the word catholic. In the Creed, we do not express faith in a specific denomination, but in the church worldwide -- that is, that there is one body, united by God's Spirit. The phrase "communion of saints" implies the same thing -- that as we all commune or have unity with Christ through the Holy Spirit, we also commune with each other. We will be united to one another forever.

<http://www.christianodyssey.com/history/apostles.htm>

Q: What do we mean when we say that Jesus... "descended into hell"?

Modern Christians generally use the word "hell" to refer to fiery place where the wicked are judged at the end of time. But at the time the creed was developed, "hell" simply meant the realm of the dead, both good and evil, prior to the final resurrection, which is consistent with the way scripture uses the word in the original languages.

For example, the scriptures do assert that Jesus was actually in "hell" prior to the resurrection, but this may not be clear in your English translation of the Bible. It depends on which version you use. For example, consider Acts 2:25-27 in the King James Version:

For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

Acts 2:25-27, KJV, Emphasis added

Now, look at that same passage in the New International Version:

David said about him:
 " I saw the Lord always before me.
 Because he is at my right hand,
 I will not be shaken.
 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
 my body also will live in hope,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
 nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

Acts 2:25-27, NIV, *Emphasis added*

It is quite clear that when these scriptures speak of "hell", they are referring to the grave and/or the realm of the dead. A couple of other interesting passages to note are:

Matthew 16:18 (**King James**) *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

Matthew 16:18 (**New International**) *And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

Hades is the New Testament word for the place of the dead. This verse is actually a prophecy about the power of the resurrection; the grave will not be able to "hold" those who are in the body of Christ.

Another significant passage is: **Rev. 20:13-14**

(KJV) And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

(New International) The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

In this passage, "hell" (Greek *hades*) is not the fiery place of judgment - rather "hell" is something *which will be destroyed in the fiery place* of judgment. There is a clear distinction between the two, but that distinction is sometimes lost in the translation.

In summary, the Apostle's Creed uses the word "hell" in the same way the King James Version of the Bible uses it - to refer to the place of the dead. When we confess that Jesus "descended into hell", we mean that after he died for us he went to "the lower parts of the earth", meaning the place of the dead (Ephesians 4:9).

It is a common belief ... that on this occasion he took the souls of those who had died trusting in the promises made under the Old Covenant — Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others — and brought them out of the realm of the dead and into heavenly glory. But the creed is not concerned with this point. The reference to the descent into Hades (or Hell, or Sheol) is here to make it clear that the death of Jesus was not just a swoon or a coma, but death in every sense of the word.

James Kiefer, <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/apostles.htm>

Q: Why don't we just re-translate the Creed to say universal instead of "catholic", and the grave instead of "hell"?

We think it is better instead to encourage Christians to improve their knowledge of the faith and to expand their vocabulary, rather than to tinker with the oldest confession of faith in the history of Christendom. The Creed was formulated, recited and sung by the martyrs, and the people who preserved the Bible for us. As long as there have been English speaking Christians, the Creed has been recited in essentially the same form we now use. It is a priceless treasure of our faith, and like any priceless treasure, it is best left in its original condition.

Q: What about the difficulties we face in the translation of these words?

There are really only two possible choices. In the first place, we can "dumb-down" a priceless part of our Christian heritage in order to accommodate the ignorance ³ of modern Christians. * The second choice is to attempt to "smarten-up" modern Christians by expanding both their vocabulary and their knowledge of the faith. The Apostles Creed is a learning opportunity for modern Christians who tend to know far too little about the history and content of our faith. If it stretches us a little in the process, so much the better. It's more than worth the effort to know that when we say these words in unison (and unaltered), we add our voices to a chorus, which has been sung by countless millions of believers, in all languages, spanning almost the entire history of the Christian faith.

¹ http://www.crcna.org/pages/apostles_creed.cfm

² <http://www.christianodyssey.com/history/apostles.htm>

³ By "ignorance" we mean lack of awareness, no slur is intended.

For further reading, see Alister McGrath, "I Believe": Exploring the Apostles' Creed (InterVarsity, 1998)