

Luther's Small Catechism

The Apostle's Creed

The Apostle's Creed is broken into three articles devoting each one to a person of the Holy Trinity. The Apostle's Creed is one of three ecumenical creeds held by the Holy Catholic¹ and Apostolic² Church. The creeds were formulations created by the church throughout the centuries to answer questions about faith as such questions and differences in belief and teaching occurred. The concern of the church has always been of succession of the faith moving forward to other generation. The term used to describe the process is *Apostolic Succession*. Though it has come involve the formation of the church in many cases, its primary function was to pass the faith down.

Apostolic succession entered the spotlight again in the discussion with the Episcopal Church and the formation of the Concordat and the CCM (Call to common mission) document that resulted in full communion between our two church judicatories. In an Episcopal system of succession such as that held by the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches, the succession is understood as passing through the Bishops.³ In their system the forward conveyance of the gospel and teachings depends upon the oversight of the teaching through the office of bishop, and there the ordination of priests by the bishops. It also resulted in the authorization of the laying on of hands by the bishop at all confirmations as well.

The Lutheran reformation in Germany brought about a change in the Episcopal succession because in Germany and Western Europe there were no bishops who came along in the reformation. The continued ordination of priest required a different perspective on handing down the faith. The writings of the Lutheran confessors became key. The issue of "what" got handed down became far more vital than "who" laid on hands in ordination. Thus the Book of Concord⁴ became the means along with the Books of the Bible Old and New Testaments of handing down the teachings of the Apostles.

The Creeds

The Apostle's Creed is the oldest of the three ecumenical creeds of the catholic faith. Its origins are from about the first century. It represents a simple compilation of the faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It was not written by the twelve; nonetheless it was written by the apostles of the next generation. All are apostles who are sent out to teach and baptize in Jesus' name. It was probably used as a means of instructing people in preparation for baptism.

¹ Here the world catholic is used to designate its universality not its exclusive use by the Roman Catholic Church. Catholicity in our Lutheran circles denotes the connection of all Christians to the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as all those baptized Christians who bear the name of Christ.

² As the word Apostolic is used it denotes the connection to the apostles and their teachings handed down through the generations.

³ The word Episcopal is derived from the Greek *episcopos* which is translated bishop.

⁴ Our collection of Theological writings handed down through the generations: The Augsburg Confession, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism, Luther's Large Catechism, The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and the Formula of Concord. These writings have formed the foundation of our Lutheran Teaching, primarily the Augsburg Confession.

The Nicene Creed, also known as the Constantinopolitan Creed because its origin Constantinople under the Imperial Reign of Constantine in 325CE, came about as an answer to questions circulating about the dual nature of Christ, being both truly God and truly human.

The Athanasian Creed was the product of the sixth century also addressing issue of the Holy Trinity and Christology.

Early Creedal Formulations

In Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:5-11 there exists possible one of the oldest formations of faith in Christ. The verses appear in the poetic form and many constitute a hymn.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking for form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
and being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death---
even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend, in heaven and on the earth and
under the earth
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁵

We see a creedal statement about Jesus' pre-human existence as God, his humility in stepping into the incarnation as a human being and his acceptance of the role of slave evening serving God and humanity to the point of death on the cross. The creedal statement proclaims him God's exalted returned to God as God. The letter to the Philippians dates about 62 CE but the hymn precedes Paul's use of it.

First Article

*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*⁶

As you read Luther's *What is This? (Was is das?)*, what becomes apparent is the way Luther takes the faith of the creed and narrows it from the universal to the existential. "I believe that God has created me

⁵ NRSV translation taken from the *Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁶ All quotations take from *Luther's Small Catechism*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. Translations are done by Timothy J. Wengert, original copyright 1994.

together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.”⁷ For Luther, faith moves far beyond being a mental exercise or intellectual ascent, but becomes the basis of the relationship between each individual and God. This faith in a God who created the universe has become the faith and trust in the God who created me, and provides for me all that is necessary to keep my life functioning every day.

His explanation of the First Article is about creating, providing, and protection out of a motive of “pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”⁸

Proceeding from this three-fold gift comes a debt, “For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.”⁹ Luther does not ever hesitate to point out to us that we are not “scott free” in the relationship with God. God has done all the giving, we have done all the receiving, and we owe God our single hearted devotion. This is a first commandment issue. Yet, the only payment that we could ever offer is *thanks, praise, service, and obedience*. In Luther’s own words, “This is most certainly true.” Such a debt is too great for anyone to repay. No matter how much we return it would never be enough.

The Second Article

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.¹⁰

The second article of the creed is dedicated to the person, work, and ministry of Jesus Christ. Luther begins with the essential, Jesus is truly God and truly human. He is God – “begotten of the Father in eternity,” and “truly human being born of the virgin Mary.” Yet his explanation of the article designates this Jesus as “my Lord.”¹¹

Lordship is about ownership. In the old feudal system that Martin Luther would have known, the Lord of the Land owns all. Those who live on the land are completely dependent upon the Lord to provide all things. The land is his, the crops are his, the house is his, and the very right live there is his. Luther grabs that concept of the Lordship from the pages of the New Testament, where Lord carries yet another meaning. Carried over from the Old Testament, Lord is the designation of the Old Testament tradition for the name of God, Yahweh. As the name was not to be pronounced, Lord was spoken in its place. To say, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” carries the twofold meaning of being the owner of all, and of being God. To say that Jesus Christ is “my Lord,” is to establish the godly claim upon the each individual.

⁷ “The First Article on Creation,” *Luther’s Small Catechism*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), p.36.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Small Catechism, p. 37.

¹¹ Ibid.

Luther goes on to provide the substance of that Lordship:

1. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. Where the first article establishes the debt that could never be paid, the second article establishes the payment of that debt. Redemption is the purchase back of that which was lost. This Lord has “redeemed” us who were lost and condemned.
2. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. The very essence of humanity fallen into sin predicated new ownership—sin, death, and the devil. We confess this in our common confession every week, “We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.”¹² It is often difficult to grasp the essence of sin in the human condition. Often we resort to thinking only in terms of the thoughts, words, and deeds of humanity sinfulness; yet sin, in our tradition, is more considered on the order of something so deep its almost art of our human DNA. We are not purchased from our sins, but from the very sin that absorbs our entire humanity and captured it to the will of someone other than God. Luther in his time saw that captor as the devil who wielded the sword of death. The purchase goes deep. We are reminded that this purchase was not with “silver or gold”, but with “his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.”
3. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Here Luther has revealed the outcomes of the Lord’s great gift, ownership of us, not merely as slaves, but as children and inheritors of all that God has in store for us. This gift includes a life beyond the grave where he lives and rules for all eternity.

We cannot escape that tension that lies between service and slavery. This is a tension that goes to the root of the law/gospel dialectic. Do we serve because we have no choice, because the penalties are too steep; or do we serve because God in Christ Jesus has freed us already from all of the penalties of failure, serving because we have been purchased freely and out of love him? That is the tension of human Christian life. We are not free to do as we please, we have been freed to do what God wills known that our shortcomings are forgiven, because we have been forgiven.

The Third Article

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.¹³

This article presents the amazing totality of God’s activity in the human circle. Luther begins the article’s discussion with the foundation of faith as the work of God through the Holy Spirit. He says,

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gift, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.¹⁴

¹² The common confession as used in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress, 2006.

¹³ Small Catechism, p. 39.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Even the fact that we believe in Jesus Christ is the work of God. How many times have we heard people's disappointment because they didn't receive what they prayed for? How many times have we heard the phrase, "you just didn't have enough faith?" Here Luther dispels the falsity that we have anything to do with faith at all in either respect to quantity or existence of faith itself. Faith is the gift of God. Faith is the action of God on our human life. Faith is the stirring of God in the heart and mind of each and every human being; it is the pull that has drawn us to God and force that holds us there. Faith is the connecting relationship between us and Lord who has redeemed us. This dispels any possibility of faith as a work, something that we do to earn God's attention. Faith is the means by which we can look upon ourselves as owned by God, but which we can depend upon God to provide and protect what he has created. Faith is means of trusting that we, not only our sins are forgiven, that we have been brought into the presence of God and made holy.

The Spirits work:

1. Daily forgives all sins
2. On the last day it is the Spirit that will raise me and all the dead and bestow eternal life.

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