

Redeemer OPC, Hawaii
Adult Sunday School
The Apostles' Creed (1)
"History and Characteristics"

- I. Introduction. We begin the study of the Apostles' Creed because of the significant place that it holds in the history and statement of the church's beliefs drawn from Scripture about the basics of the Christian faith. You won't hear any novel theology presented in this study, but only that which is in keeping with Scripture as it is understood in the historic Reformed faith. But we will delve fairly deeply into some parts of the theology that the statements of the creed introduce and the history behind some of the statements. You will therefore hear things that the framers of the Apostles' Creed themselves probably did not understand at that point. You will probably hear some things that are new to you, things that perhaps you had not been taught before. But there won't be anything novel—no new theology that has not been known and recognized by God's people as the truth of Scripture before now. We stick to the old paths here because that is the safe route of the gospel and the whole counsel of God to our salvation and growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. We'll begin in the first lesson with the history of the creed and an overview of its general characteristics.
- II. The History of the Apostles' Creed. It is the earliest of the post-Scriptural ecumenical creeds that are still in regular use by the church. I.e., it is the earliest of those creeds that were authored after the authorship of the canon of Scripture was completed. Ecumenical means that it is a statement of belief that applies to and may be confessed by the true church universally, not just one denomination, or a particular branch of theology like the Reformed faith. Arminian brothers and sisters in Christ believe what the creed states also.
 - A. The Creed's Authorship. Who wrote it? First clue: It wasn't the apostles.

1. A past legend had it that each apostle had contributed one clause, thus resulting in its 12 clauses. But we know from some of the earliest occurrences of the creed that it did not originally have 12 clauses; some were added later. So, we know that the apostles did not write it. But, we don't know who did write it.
2. Origin of its name. It is named the Apostles' Creed because it summarizes apostolic teaching drawn from Scripture.

B. The Creed's Dates.

1. In its original form, it dates from about 150 AD.
2. A Greek language version of the creed was recorded in 340 AD. Since the creed is a liturgical form (used in worship services), and since Greek was the liturgical language of the Western church only until about 250 AD, it must date from prior to that.
3. A Q/A version of a similar creed was recorded in 215 AD, so the Apostles' Creed was likely in existence and use before that.

C. The Creed's Form.

1. It began as a baptismal formula. I.e., it was taught to and memorized by those who were preparing to profess faith in Christ. When in front of the church body in worship to be baptized, and asked what they believed to profess their faith, they would recite the creedal formula. It was first known as the Old Roman Creed; it was found recorded in a commentary from the year 404 AD, which indicated that it had been in use a long time by then.
2. It is distinctly a creed of the Western church. The Eastern church did not sanction it at any time prior to the Great Schism in 1054 AD. Since the Eastern church left the gospel at that time, and the creed had not ever been

sanctioned by the Eastern church, it is therefore the product and continuing creed of the true church.

3. Early versions of the creed did not have all of the clauses that we use now. Some additions appear in a 6th century version.
4. The final form we have now appeared in Latin in the 8th century. The creed was used in Latin after ~250 AD, but the final form appeared ~500 years later.
5. Clauses that were added later: (under the Father), “Maker of heaven and earth”; (under the Son), “conceived by the Holy Spirit,” “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” “dead, and buried,” “He descended into Hades,” “and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty”; (under the Spirit), “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” “catholic church,” “the communion of saints,” “and the life everlasting. Amen.”

III. Overview of the Creed’s General Characteristics.

A. It Is Composed of Historical Statements.

1. Why historical statements? One must believe the historical facts and truth of what took place regarding all three Persons of the Godhead, and especially Christ and His saving work, in order to be Christian. If these things were not historically accomplished, then there is no salvation for anyone. Man sinned in space and time, as a matter of historical fact. The penalty for sin had to be paid in space and time, as a matter of historical fact, for sin to be forgiven. We cannot believe in myths and non-existent things and still have a real salvation.
2. Why use creedal statements instead of Scripture? If the concern is to prepare, examine, and provide content for professions of faith, why not find a

Scripture text for each truth the creed states and memorize them? The formulation of statements of faith or doctrines to be believed do not rely on a single verse of Scripture, but on all that the Bible teaches about a particular matter, distilled down into a logically consistent statement of the teaching (doctrine) (cp. 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 3:13-14). Also, we are taught by Scripture itself that Biblically accurate confessions of faith are good and are to be used by Christians; see 1 Tim. 6:12, and the book of Hebrews where many times it says “let us hold fast the confession of our faith” (or “hope”).

3. If understanding and retention of doctrines is essential to saving faith, why formulate the creed with historical statements of fact? Historical statements can form and express much about doctrines. But more basically, the historical facts are the foundation for doctrine, particularly for the doctrines of the gospel. When the apostles, as Christ’s witnesses, explained the significance of the historical facts of His Person and work, they gave us doctrines (teachings) for God’s people to understand what He did to save sinners. These doctrines were entirely consistent with what the prophets who wrote the OT had taught God’s people in anticipation of the Messiah and what He would do for them, in order that they, too, would have some explanation, though not the fullness, of the significance of His promised work in which they could believe and be saved.
4. Why continue to form other creeds and confessions? As the church grew in its understanding of Scripture and its theology and doctrine, it needed to add to, clarify, and improve its statements of faith by putting down in writing the doctrines that the church distilled from Scripture, in addition to the earlier statements of historical fact.

B. It Has a Trinitarian Structure.

1. It has three sections, each of which confesses truth about one of the three Persons of the Trinity. Yet, it begins with, “I believe in God...”, implying one God.
2. This was important then, as it is now, because of the many groups that claim to be Christian, and yet are anti-Trinitarian. Because of the broadening of the backgrounds from which many people are coming into the OPC, a traditionally Reformed church, the OPC has had to add a vow to its membership vows to ensure that prospective members affirm the triune God of Scripture and the two natures, fully divine and fully human, in the one Person of Christ.