

iBelieve

# THE APOSTLES' CREED

*40 Daily Readings  
for the Purposeful Presbyterian*  
Small Group Study Guide Included

*I Believe:*  
*40 Daily Readings*  
*for the Purposeful Presbyterian*  
**The Apostles' Creed**

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Published by Witherspoon Press, a ministry of the General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, Kentucky.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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*I Believe:  
40 Daily Readings  
for the Purposeful Presbyterian*

## The Apostles' Creed

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## Introduction

If a nonbeliever asked you what you believe, what would you say? A good place to start would be the Apostles' Creed. All Christians share the Creed; we say it together, many of us weekly; and it summarizes the faith in a few words.

Even as we recite these well-worn words, however, we may admit that we don't understand them well enough to answer the questions that would certainly come from the nonbeliever. The language of the creed sometimes sounds foreign and antiquated.

The Reformed branch of the church has sought to restate the faith in new vocabularies that meet the circumstances of a particular era. Presbyterian readers will be familiar with that practice; the Presbyterian Church has within the last forty-one years added two confessions to its Book of Confessions: The Confession of 1967 and A Brief Statement of Faith. The Theological Declaration of Barmen of the 1930s, written in the face of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, and the Belhar Confession of the 1980s, a South African confession written in the context of apartheid, are additional examples. The Reformed have ever understood that God's Word intersects with human history such that it calls forth a confessional response that clearly states what the church believes against the press of issues that call faith into question.

The church will use language that communicates within the context of its age. And yet we return to a creed that speaks in language that hails from the earliest centuries of the church's life. The words echo from deep places. Still, they puzzle us, cause us pause, and sometimes startle us to wonder whether we can understand, much less agree. So we study the creed, if only to understand its vocabulary, to clarify just what is being claimed, and to learn what it might say.

By reading this book you have embarked upon a disciplined study of the creed over the next forty days. The daily readings that follow are designed for individual study and reflection. Perhaps you observe a regular devotional time during your day; these readings could provide content for that important time.

For those who wish to reflect on these readings in a group setting, a small group study guide is offered on pages 57–80 of this book.

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# “I Believe”

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 saints;  
the forgiveness of sins;  
the resurrection of the body;  
and the life everlasting. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

1. *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2004), 7.

# Credo

Christians have been confessing from the beginning, voicing creeds. It's how the term "creed" originated: *credo*, I believe. We say it out loud, in public, in what or in whom we place our final trust. This is not just antique language and ancient ideas. Any time you encounter what the church teaches, you must ask yourself: Do I believe that? Another question is: What does it matter? What's at stake in our believing, for ourselves and for the world?

A creed is not Scripture, which is the witness to God's activity, nor is it the experience of God. Rather, a creed tries to put in words the implications of our experience of God. The experience of God demands articulation. A creed helps us do that. What we believe and what the church teaches matter a great deal.

The Apostles' Creed is the worshipful articulation of the church's trust in the particular God who calls it into being and whose story is told in the church's Scripture. In uttering the creed, the believer enters the great story of God's way with the world.

All language about God is inadequate. God is, truly, ineffable—that is, beyond words. We speak only to keep from remaining silent. We confess and worship the God who meets us, not as idea, concept, force, or even as the principle of being itself, but personally.

The church formed its creed as a way of distinguishing itself from an alternative form of belief. Christianity was born into a world suffused with religion, even religious fervor.

A particular “set” of religions pressed particularly hard against the fledgling faith. These go by the term *gnostic*. Although Gnosticism was a complex form of religiosity, we must attempt to describe it briefly, for Gnosticism was not only a major competitor with Christianity; many who entered the church came with a gnostic understanding and tried to interpret the faith within the categories of their former faith.

The Greek term means “knowing”; gnostics claimed to possess a secret knowledge of the ways of heaven and earth. Gnosticism was committed to a transcendent god who was reflected through a series of lesser deities. This supreme god was divorced from the lower world of matter, which a lesser sort of deity had created.

Some forms of Gnosticism believed in a Redeemer, a figure of light, who came to save humans from the corrupt world of matter. This Redeemer’s presence was only apparently human, for the human form was too earthly for one who partook of the divine substance. The “saved” were rescued from this dark and sad world as they were initiated into the light of gnosis, or secret knowledge of revelation, beyond reason and faith.

Gnosticism also describes a general religious worldview, alive and well today, and even in Christian circles. Study the following heretical statements; if you’ve heard these, you might have been in the presence of a Gnostic:

Jesus was a Redeemer figure, human in appearance only. The world and all physical matter are evil from creation. The human’s goal is to escape the body. Baptism, an initiation into a secret discipline, is just such an escape from this life and the beginning of a journey beyond this creation.

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Against these beliefs, the church began to formulate a belief statement. The creed was a short way of stating the essentials of this young faith. In the second century, Hippolytus of Rome had written down a Greek “apostolic tradition” in the form of questions put to new believers about to be baptized. Scholars have traced the skeleton of the Apostles’ Creed to these questions.

Thus, the Apostles’ Creed forms the faith in which we are baptized and informs our stand against other claims to our allegiance. Through our lives, as God calls us to ever new commitments of faith, we return to the creed, to reclaim our identities as God’s beloved.

The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus' injunction to his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (*Matt. 28:19*). The church was doing just that. It had taken root in the nations; and now it was baptizing in the triune name. "I believe" in the God whose name is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

The creed, then, is an expression of trust, and that trust is placed not in a dogma, not in a religious system, not in a set of ideas, not even in a particular way of life. It is trust placed in an other. It is much as a child trusts her parent with her life; or a friend trusts friend.

Still, that other is not an unspecified "other." A groom doesn't pledge his life to a "bride," as if any old (or young) bride will do. He places his future, any children that will come, and his dreams with a particular person. It is the *name* that counts; the name is part and parcel of this person.

The baptized who made the creed her own, then, was not simply agreeing that "God exists." Her world was filled with many gods. Nor was she admitting to being religious; her neighbors were likely as religious as she. She was staking her life on a particular God, named as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She did not simply believe *that* certain assertions about God are so; she believed *in*, she gave herself to, this other in trust.

## The Creed as Story

Why is there no mention of the Bible or Scripture in the Apostles' Creed? The query arises especially from the Reformed corner of Protestantism, where we insist on Scripture as nothing less than the Word of God. Such Reformed confessions as the Second Helvetic, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster Confession all have articles or chapters on Scripture as the Word of God.

In the creed, by contrast, the believer is *naming* the God in whom he trusts. And Scripture is *not* God, but the revelation of God through the stories about the actions of God. Scripture witnesses to this God, as does the creed. But Scripture cannot stand in God's place. The result would be idolatry, albeit an idolatry that has proved to be peculiarly attractive to the Reformed. Even if Scripture is not mentioned in the creed, if we do not say "I believe in" the Scripture, that doesn't make the Bible less important. The Bible is the story behind the Name. The old books record the remarkable ways of this particular God with a particular people.

Names are more than a handy means of identification. If we needed only a means of identification, we could be satisfied with Social Security numbers. A name comes with a story, as genealogists know and enjoy as they pursue surnames back through the generations, slowly building up a story. Maybe the McDougals fought old clan wars, found their way to North America from poverty, established a home on the frontier. Their story includes a saint and a scoundrel or two. Your family name tells your story, or part of it. Your given name, too, has a story. It comes with all the experiences, all the adventures, all the disappointments, all the friends and lovers and acquaintances that go into making you the particular person you've become.

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Scripture tells the story of the God with this particular name, sometimes in creeds. Deuteronomy has Moses instructing Israel to recite this creed when bringing their first fruits to the altar:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

(Deut. 26:5–9)

The confession is the story of Israel’s liberation from Egypt and guidance to the promised land. Notice that the worshiper *names* the God who liberates. This is the God who disclosed the divine name to Moses at the burning bush, this name, Yahweh, the Lord.

God’s name comes with a story, with a history. The creed tells that story in short form. God’s story precedes the world’s beginning: God is the “maker of heaven and earth.” God’s story reaches its historical center in the person of Jesus: The Son was “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate . . . .” God’s story continues into the present: The Holy Spirit brings into being “the holy catholic Church . . . the forgiveness of sins.” Indeed, it moves to a future in both the second and third articles as the Son will “come to judge the quick and the dead,” and we shall enjoy the “resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.”

## An Act of Worship

The creed's baptismal ancestry reminds us that the recitation of the creed is an act of worship. That too helps us to understand what's going on with the creed. It places the creed in the context of the community gathered by the Spirit before its God, lifting its prayers and singing its hymns.

The creed is first a profession of faith to the Other, to this particular God. We acknowledge to God that we are gathered in worship of the God who comes to us as the liberator of Israel, who disclosed himself most fully at the cross, and who breathes new life, new creation, into us. It's like saying "I love you" to our beloved. We commit ourselves in trust to this God.

In fact, if we remember that the creed emerges from baptism, it reminds us of our baptismal identity. There, we vowed to "reject evil" and to "renounce sin and the power of evil in your life and in the world." Thus, we repeat our promise to turn from all other powers that tempt us to trust, all other "gods" that promise blessedness if we but give them our fealty.

Second, we profess our faith before the world. Our worship is a public act. We identify ourselves with this God and so acknowledge that God calls us to a way of being and living that distinguishes itself from other paths.

To be church is to be "confessional." The historic Reformation churches, particularly the Reformed, identify themselves as confessional churches. When asked what we believe, we can point to the Heidelberg Catechism or the Westminster Confession. But to be confessional is deeper than adherence to the doctrinal writings of our forebears. We act, we confess. The accent is on the verb, not the noun.

In the 1930s the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church propounded the Theological Declaration of Barmen. The first article began: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." That hardly sounds controversial. Yet in the context of rising Nazism, the implication was clear. If Jesus is the "one Word of God which we have to hear" (emphasis added), then all other ideologies must fall away. To say this was to place the believer's life on the line.

Thus, when we say "I believe," we speak a word that does something powerful. Philosophers have identified what they call "performative utterances." That mouthful indicates certain statements we utter that make something happen even as we say them. For example, when we say "I promise," our very speaking those words makes it a promise. A couple pledging their troth at the altar are not simply reporting on the state of their emotional attraction and commitment. They set their lives in motion in a particular direction. Their very words will find fulfillment years later as they hang in with each other through the rough patches, or as one waits on the other in the long lingering twilight of life.

When we say "I believe," we do more than sign on to a set of doctrines put in place by the ancient church. We commit ourselves out loud and in public to the God named in the short story we recite. We acknowledge our baptismal identity, that we belong to this God and to no other.

## SMALL GROUP STUDY

For discussion of Days 1–7 in the daily reader;  
to be used after Day 7

Session 1

# “I Believe”

## SESSION FOCUS

The Apostles’ Creed brings us into the long history of the church, as we declare our trust in God, who has called it into being.

## MAIN IDEAS

This study begins by locating the Apostles’ Creed within the church’s story, highlighting the gnostic context against which the creed was written. The emphasis is on the creed as a declaration of trust in a particular God—one who is named and addressed in the creed as Father, Son, and Spirit.

The emphasis on name has particular implications. First, the name distinguishes this God. Second, the name implies a story or a history. Furthermore, because the creed is an act of the church, the story is greater than the individual believer, and each must find her or his way into the story.

## PREPARING TO LEAD

- Read the daily reader, Days 1–7.
- Write, or ask a calligrapher to letter, the Apostles’ Creed (from Day 1) on one to three sheets of poster board that can be displayed in the meeting space throughout this study. Do not assume that everyone has memorized it, even those who have may not be able to recall a section without saying the entire creed. Using this contemporary version will give everyone an even footing.
- Explore the gnostic beliefs that prompted the writing of the Apostles’ Creed as described in the text for Day 3.
  - Where is Gnosticism found in Christianity today?
- Explore the meaning of *creed* and appropriate uses for the Apostles’ Creed.
  - Consider that it was used as a way to initiate or teach new Christians in the early church.

- What does it mean to profess a creed, especially one as ancient as the Apostles' Creed, when the meanings of words change over the centuries?
- How is this creed different from other creeds commonly used in the service of worship?
- What distinguishes a "confessional" church from a "non-confessional" church?
- Explore how saying the Apostles' Creed with others in a service of worship provides an entry for us, individually and as a community, into the communion of saints.
  - What difference does it make that we say this creed together, with one voice? What is this story we enter when we say "I believe"?

## GATHERING ACTIVITIES

- To begin this session, have the group name creeds and confessions, such as the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Confession. Then have them turn to Deuteronomy 26:5–9. Read it aloud together.
  - How do these verses function as a creed or confession?
- Ask the group to list features of Gnosticism based on the text for Day 3. Write their ideas on newsprint. Then, looking at the Apostles' Creed, note where it refutes any of those features.

## GUIDING THE DISCUSSION

- Three decades or so ago this quote from the *Peanuts* comic strip made the round of posters and sweatshirts: "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." Ask the group to debate the appropriateness of this statement for a confessional church (refer to the text for Day 6).

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- Present a description of the gnostic beliefs that were prevalent at the time the Apostles' Creed was prepared. Refer to the text for Day 3; also consult a dictionary of religion or an encyclopedia. Allow time for the group to ask questions for clarification.
  - Have the group identify religious ideas today that are the same as or similar to the concepts of Gnosticism.
  - Together identify ways the Apostles' Creed presents the story of the Christian faith in order to counter the gnostic beliefs. During this discussion, point out the use of the creed as a baptismal creed. Also note that the Bible is not mentioned in the Apostles' Creed. What other areas critical to our faith are absent?
  - Central to the Apostles' Creed is the recognition that it is a statement of the church, one that brings together that community of faith across the centuries. Ask the following: "How does one think differently about saying the Apostles' Creed when the context is the community of faith and not primarily an individual or personal creed?" As you talk about the Apostles' Creed as the church's creed, include the concepts of the creed as a way the church tells its story, as an act of worship, and as a way to enter the story of the Christian church. Are there other functions for the Apostles' Creed?
  - Say the Apostles' Creed together. Be sure everyone has a copy of the creed, even if they memorized it years ago. Write personal creeds: As an ongoing activity, provide time for group members to write their own creeds or credos during or at the end of each session. While it is important to speak the church's creed together, we grow spiritually when we attempt to articulate our individual understanding of the faith. For this session, ask the participants to list the topics or concepts from the Apostles' Creed that seem most important to them today, recognizing that such a list would probably change as their life circumstances change.

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## CONCLUDING THE DISCUSSION

- Sing a hymn: Sing or read a hymn that professes the Christian faith, such as “We All Believe in One True God” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal*, no. 137).
- Conclude with prayer. Give thanks for the words of the Apostles’ Creed and for Christians, through the years and today, who seek to understand them and live them.

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## NOTES: