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A family study of the Apostles' Creed

By Luke Gilkerson

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THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the 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 arose 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.

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INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

The Apostles' Creed is one of the oldest Christian creeds, confessed by believers for more than 1,600 years—and older versions date back to some of the earliest days of the church.

It is common today, especially among Evangelicals, to fear formal creeds as somehow *replacing* the Bible, but this was not a fear shared by the original Reformers. The Creed *assumes* the authority of the Bible by borrowing the very language of Scripture for its content.

Confession of the Apostles' Creed in the Roman Catholic Church is still common today, but it is also common in many Protestant churches. When Reformer Martin Luther was compiling his Small Catechism for Christian families, he included what he considered three essentials: the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and the Heidelberg Catechism contain the same three essentials. Both Calvin and Zwingli included it among their doctrinal norms. It is also cited in full at the end of the oldest editions of the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Luther said of the Apostles' Creed, "Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement." John Calvin set the Creed to music so it could be used for public worship. John Wesley called the Apostles' Creed a "beautiful summary" of the essential truths of our faith, and when writing the evening prayer service for Methodists, he included the recitation of the Creed.

The Apostles' Creed has an honored place in many Christian traditions, but what value does it have for Christian families today?

1. The Creed gives our children essentials of the faith.

Creeds remind us that there are some beliefs worth *fighting* for. We should strive to rightly interpret and believe *all* God has revealed, but creeds help us to remember there are some matters of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Most creeds are formed in times of heresy. As heretical sects arose in the church, the church fathers would point to the traditions passed down to them by the Apostles—and of course the writings of the Apostles—to crush heresies that were threatening the gospel.

Orthodox creeds like the Apostles' Creed give our children accurate summaries of the essentials. And as heresies arise today, our children will be more equipped to say, "This is not what I was taught. This is not the faith handed down to us from Christ."

This is why we should teach kids the Apostles' Creed: it states in simple, Scriptural language the essential facts of our faith as God has revealed them, from the creation of the world to Christ's redeeming work to eternal life in the world to come.

2. The Creed teaches our kids that Christianity is "confessional."

For the last couple hundred years, Western Christianity, by and large, has moved away from the importance of creeds. In the interest of unity, some in the Church want to be minimalists when it comes to doctrine. "No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible," they say. As well intentioned as this is, it overlooks two facts: (1) "no creed but Christ" is functionally a type of creed anyway, and (2) the apostles themselves stressed the importance of creeds.

The Apostles did not just write sacred Scripture; they also summarized essentials of the gospel in creedal statements. The first creed of the New Testament is "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11). The Christian was one who "received Christ Jesus the Lord" (Colossians 2:6), confessing that Jesus is God's Son, come in the flesh (1 John 2:23; 4:2-3; 4:15; 2 John 7). These short statements summarize the believer's loyalty and commitment to Jesus Christ, and they state truths about Jesus in his relation to God.

Other examples of apostolic creeds include 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Philippians 2:6-11. The Apostles taught the church to be confessional: to provide believers with formal, verbal summaries of the faith.

3. The Creed teaches our children to value tradition.

Many in today's culture devalue the past. But as Christians, we should celebrate tradition.

It is important not to confuse *tradition* with *traditionalism*. Jaroslav Pelikan wisely stated, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." As Christians we should take joy in the living faith of those who came before us, those whose lives were radically changed by the gospel, who fought to pass the gospel on to the next generation.

Far from being a cold, lifeless, abstract text, church historian Philip Schaff says the Apostles' Creed is "a profession of living facts and saving truths. It is a liturgical poem and an act of worship."

4. The Creed teaches our children that Christianity is personal but not private.

When families and churches recite the Apostles' Creed, they are reciting something deeply personal, starting with the phrase "I believe." The Creed was written as a personal statement of faith, and this is something all parents should stress to their kids. Merely reciting the words isn't nearly as important as really *believing* them.

But in our increasingly relativistic age, we fight a culture that believes that *personal* faith is meant to be kept *private*. "It's fine if you have your personal beliefs, as long as you don't try to pass them on to others." But creeds are written not merely as personal statements, but as public declarations said by whole communities. The very reason why creeds are formulated is to pass the essentials of the faith on to future generations.

5. The Creed connects our children to their Christian heritage.

Early church fathers, following in the footsteps of the Apostles, formulated what they called the "Rule of Faith" (*Regula Fidei*), meaning a "measure" or "ruler" or orthodoxy. In the second and third centuries, this Rule of Faith was also called "the tradition," "the preaching," and the "Rule of Truth." Church father Origen described it as "the teaching of the church preserved unaltered and handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles."

This "Rule" was passed on via oral tradition, and while it varied in form and content, its core was similar from church to church. In the late second century, Irenaeus was the first to record a version of the Rule of Faith in written form:

"...this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race..."

Similar creedal statements are found in various forms and are discussed in the writings of others like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen.

A disciple of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, recorded what would become known as the “Old Roman Creed” in AD 215, which was used for baptism candidates in the church at Rome. Notice how similar it is to the present day Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God the Father almighty
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
Who was under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended into heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Church
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh.

This practice to recite the Old Roman Creed before baptism spread to other churches and became a widespread practice.

This creed was first called the Apostles’ Creed (*Symbolum Apostolorum*) in AD 390 in a letter addressed to Pope Siricius by the Council of Milan. Variations in this Creed were worked out by the seventh century.

As we teach our children the Apostles’ Creed, we should help them to appreciate that they are reciting a confession of faith that has been uttered by countless millions of Christians throughout the ages.

A Note About the Origin of the Apostles’ Creed

Does the Rule of Faith go back to the Apostles themselves? We don’t know. But the oral tradition that contained these core truths is possibly as old AD 100. The Rule of Faith was a measure for the proper reading of the Scriptures.

It was believed throughout the Middle Ages that, on the day of Pentecost, the twelve Apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit to pen the Apostles’ Creed—each Apostle

contributing one of twelve articles. This belief is foreshadowed in a sermon by Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, in the late fourth century, who wrote that the Creed was “pieced together by twelve workmen.” Soon after, Rufinus of Aquileia wrote something similar, stating the Creed was the joint work of all the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. By the sixth century, the complete legend had developed.

This story, as far as church historians can tell, is unhistorical. It is a legend that gave credence to the use of the Creed in the church.

A Note About “He Descended into Hell”

See the appendix for a more detailed description of this phrase.

This phrase is one of the more controversial phrases in the whole Creed. It is a late edition to the Creed, but the belief in Christ’s descent was a very early belief in the church. Many today still believe in Christ’s descent into the underworld after death. Others choose not to include it in the Creed or retranslate it to make the meaning clearer to modern hearers.

In this study, we have taken a cautious approach to the phrase. The earliest church traditions emphasized several things about Christ’s descent, and we are emphasizing two themes in particular. (1) The phrase means that, as a man, Christ truly died. His soul was separated from His body, and He experienced a real death. (2) The phrase means Christ’s soul departed to be in Paradise (Luke 23:43) to be with saints who had departed before Him.

Other questions about Christ’s descent are left unaddressed in this study. Did Christ rescue the saints from some kind of captivity? Was Paradise located in the underworld (Hades) or in heaven? Did He preach to the saints and/or to fallen angels? These questions are explored more in the appendix.

A Note About the “Holy Catholic Church”

The term “catholic” is interpreted broadly as the universal, comprehensive church. The emphasis here is not Roman Catholic vs. Protestant or Eastern Orthodox, but the broad, worldwide church.

A Note About the “Communion of Saints”

This phrase was a late addition to the Creed and has been the subject of much discussion. The phrase started to appear in the late fourth century in various creeds and eventually found its way into the Apostles' Creed.

Generally speaking, all agree that the phrase refers to the togetherness of the church, the people of God as one body united in Christ. The original Latin phrase was understood as “communion of holy people” (saints) or “communion of holy things” (specifically, the elements of the Lord's Supper). In the early church, the first meaning became dominant, but it was generally understood that this phrase had strong sacramental implications: the fellowship and unity of God's people was expressed visibly by participation in the Eucharist. In this study, we focus on the first meaning.

The early church also believed that the communion of saints includes not only all the saints spread throughout the world, but all the departed saints as well. This truth is expressed in Hebrews 12:22-24, where the living readers are said to be in communion with God, the worshipping angels, and the spirits of the righteous made perfect. This is a profound and rich doctrine that is worth exploring, but in this study, the communion of the saints on Earth is the primary focus.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study is designed for you to spend 30 days in a row studying the Apostles' Creed with your children, working through one lesson each day. This will immerse your children in the text.

You could also spend 30 weeks doing one lesson each week. You might choose to do this over the duration of one school year.

I would suggest using not one, but both of these approaches, particularly if you will be memorizing this passage of Scripture. Spend 30 straight days going through this study to acquaint your family with the text prior to memorizing the text. This will help them understand why you are memorizing it. Then, repeat the Bible study weekly throughout the year to study this Scripture at a slower pace and reinforce the lessons that were already covered once. Repetition is the mother of learning.

Make it a Goal to Memorize

Over the next several months or throughout an entire school year, make a commitment to memorize all of the Apostles' Creed as a family.

There is great benefit to memorizing Scripture and ancient creeds and confessions, and an added benefit to memorizing a lengthier text like this. Memorizing a whole chapter of the Bible or longer text gives our children a sense of context.

Memory Method: Using Scripture Memory Cards

One of the best ways to move Scripture and other memorized texts from short-term to long-term memory is to use a Charlotte Mason-style "memory box."

Become a subscriber at intoxicatedonlife.com/freebies and you'll get access to free printables. There, the Apostles' Creed is divided into manageable sections (2-3 lines) on individual index cards.

You'll also find free printable tabbed dividers to help organize all your cards. You'll find...

- A tab marked "Daily"
- A tab marked "Odd Days" and another marked "Even Days"
- Weekly tabs (a tab for each day of the week)
- Monthly tabs (tabs numbered 1-30)

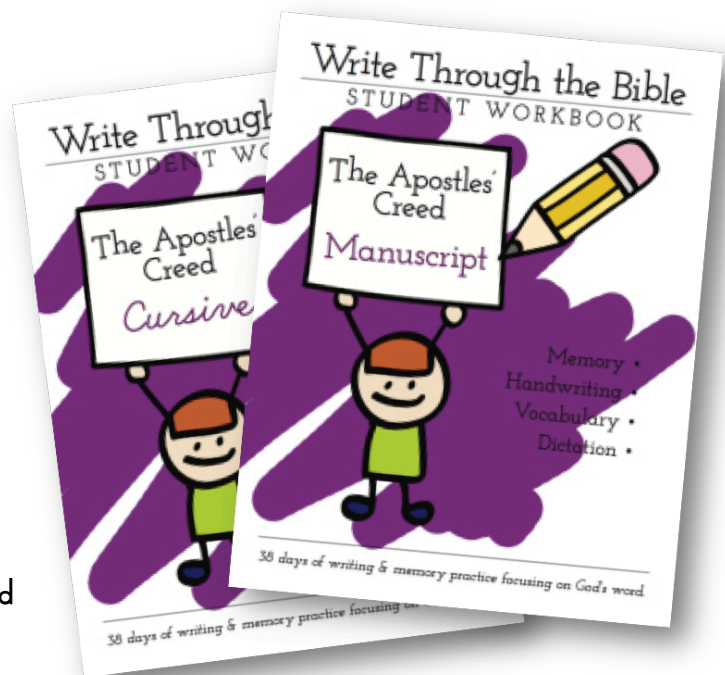
Here's how it works:

1. Place all your tabbed dividers into the box in order.
2. Start by placing the first Apostles' Creed card behind the "Daily" tab. Review this card with your child daily, having him or her recite it aloud.
3. Once your child can quote an entire card from memory with ease, move it back to either the "odd" tab or "even" tab. Then, only review that card on odd or even dates of the month.
4. Once your child continues to quote the card without help for a couple weeks, move it back to one of the weekly tabs.
5. If they can quote the card several weeks in a row without help, then move it back to one of the monthly tabs.
6. As cards move out from behind the daily tab, add new cards to the daily memory time.

Use Handwriting to Teach

In Deuteronomy 17:18-19, the kings of Israel were commanded to write out for themselves a copy of the law of Moses so that they could read it all the days of their lives. God clearly sees value in not only reading the Bible daily, but also in copying the text of the Bible by hand.

A good way to reinforce memory (and practice handwriting skills) is to copy texts by hand. **As a companion to this study, you can get a copy of our Apostles' Creed version of *Write Through the Bible*, available at intoxicatedonlife.com.**



These workbooks take 38 days to complete and combine the disciplines of handwriting, dictation, vocabulary, and memory into one daily activity. The *Write Through the Bible* downloadable workbooks are available in both manuscript and cursive and in either KJV or ESV translations.

Opening Thought:

Do you know that a lot of the earliest Christians died because of what they believed? (See if your child knows anything about that.) There are still a lot of Christians who are hurt because of their faith, but in the first few hundred years of the church, the people who kill Christians most were their own government leaders.

Back then, most Christians lived in the Roman Empire, and the greatest person in that empire was their ruler. They called these people the Caesars. These men didn't just believe they were in charge, they also believed they were gods, that they should be worshiped. They built temples where people could worship them. They demanded that their subjects say, "Caesar is Lord!" Many Christians refused to do this because they knew Caesar wasn't a god, and they had only one they called "Lord." That Lord is Jesus.

Let's read a passage from the Bible about that.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Explanation: This text is probably one of the earliest songs ever written about Jesus. It is a song about the great things Jesus did for us: how He let go of His position of glory and majesty and came to Earth as a man, how He lived as a man, how He suffered and died as a man, and how God raised Him up. Jesus obeyed His Father right up to the very end of His life.

Because He did this, God the Father gave to Jesus a name that is above every name. He gave Him the name "Lord." In earlier books of the Bible, the title "Lord" was for God alone. God said through the great prophet Isaiah, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5). This song actually quotes from that same chapter in the Bible, saying that a day is coming when the whole world will bow down on their knees and they will say that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is God (Isaiah 45:23).

That phrase, "Jesus is Lord," was what people said when they wanted to become Christians, and back then they knew that this might get them killed. Others might put them to death because they didn't call Caesar Lord. Still, they confessed "Jesus is Lord" anyway. That's how much they believed in Jesus.

What does the title “Lord” mean? *(See if your child knows what the word means.)* This title tells us something about Jesus’ relationship to God and something about His relationship to us. First, it means Jesus is equal to God the Father: both are God and both should be worshipped. Second, it means Jesus is our king and master and ruler. It means He owns us. We owe Him all of our obedience. He is king of our lives.

Questions for Your Kids:

1. What do you think it would be like if people wanted to kill you because of what you believed? *(See what your child says. Get your child to think about what he or she might do if someone came in your house while your family was reading the Bible and told you to stop worshiping Jesus. What would your child say?)*

2. Jesus has always been equal to God, but how did He get the title, “Lord”? *(Because Jesus was obedient to the Father, came to Earth, and died on the cross, the Father gave the Son the title “Lord.” God the Son has always existed, but people didn’t know it until Jesus came to Earth and did all of those amazing things. Now that Jesus has come, God the Father wants the world to honor Jesus by calling Him “Lord.”)*

3. Why is “Lord” a good title for Jesus? *(It is a good title because it is a name God gives to Himself, and Jesus is God. It is also a good title because when we say, “Jesus is Lord,” we are saying that He is the master of our lives and that we want to follow Him.)*

4. Do you sometime not act like Jesus is your Lord? *(Yes. Tell stories of the times when you don’t obey Jesus. Have your child tell a story of his or her own. At the end make sure to say, “Even though we fail to obey God, the good news is that there’s hope for people like us. If we are united to Christ, then we are forgiven for all of our sins, no matter how bad they are.”)*

Prayer: “God, we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9). We believe You exalted Your Son Jesus and gave Him the name “Lord,” the name above every name (Philippians 2:9). Forgive us for calling You Lord but not living like it. Amen.”