

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 Cor. 15:1-8, “Prepared in Worship: Creed”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/30/2017**

Today we’re talking about Creeds. So as a bit of a warm-up,  
I have two creeds for your consideration.

On the one hand, we have Apollo Creed, who was born in 1942,  
and by the early 1980s was the heavyweight champion of the world.  
After an opponent had to cancel a title-bout,  
he gave an unknown Brooklyn boxer—  
the Italian Stallion Rocky Balboa a shot at the title.  
Creed once said, “Forget about sports as a profession.  
Sports make ya grunt and smell. See, be a thinker, not a stinker.”

He split two fights with Rocky before he tragically died in the ring  
against that ruthless Russian fighting machine, Ivan Drago.

On the other hand, the Apostle’s Creed was based on Jesus’ Great Commission  
and was developed over several centuries from 180AD  
through the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. It includes phrases from writings  
of ancient Christian thinkers including Irenaeus, Tertullian,  
Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine.

In it we find striking phrases about all three persons of the Trinity,  
including Jesus who “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead,  
and buried; he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead.”

The Apostle’s Creed was the basis for the Rich Mullin’s song  
that we did earlier in the service.

It, along with the Nicene Creed are easily the most widely accepted  
and used creeds in Western Christianity.

A show of hands: Who prefers Apollo Creed? Who prefers the Apostle’s Creed?

Well, regardless of which one you prefer, it's the latter kind of Creed that we're talking about today as we take the next step in our "Prepared in Worship" series.

The idea here is for us to consider the ways in which our elements of worship prepare us for life with God in everyday settings.

Now, I didn't grow up with creeds in church. In fact, if anything, I was taught that what we needed was the Bible (the Word of God), and anything else was just human made distraction.

As a result, the Church of God (Anderson) denomination I grew up in doesn't have any official doctrines – they simply have the Bible, and that is their statement of theology and beliefs.

You see, the danger of creeds, I was told, was that you might end up believing more in them than you do in the Bible. That would certainly be a bad thing.

And I've known people who seem to put more trust in the Westminster Confession's interpretation of Scripture from the year 1647 in England than they do the interpretation of Scripture itself here in 2017.

So there can be ways of relying on creeds that are less than helpful. We do well to be on guard against elevating a particular interpretation of the Bible above the Bible itself, or even above God.

But did you know that creeds were around and used by the church even before the Bible?

We find them in many places, including Philippians chapter 2 (emptying of Christ), Colossians 1:12-20 (the cosmic Christ), Matthew 28:18-20 (the Great Commission), and John 1:1-3, 12-14 (the Word).

The example we're going to look at a bit more closely comes from, 1 Cor. 15:1-8. This text shows that the Apostle Paul himself relied on creeds of the church even before the New Testament had been completed and assembled.

To begin the passage, Paul writes that he has made known to the Corinthians  
“the gospel” which he preached to them, *and which Paul also received.*

Gordon Fee suggests that “this is technical vocabulary from Paul’s Jewish heritage  
for the transmission of religious instruction.

As with the tradition of the Lord’s Supper  
*[which Paul describes in 1 Cor. 11]*

this language indicates that the essential matters  
go back to the very beginnings of things.”

Specifically, we find this instruction that precedes Paul,  
and which he has passed on to the Corinthian church, in vv. 3b-5.

In the Greek, each line in this passage begins with the word, “that.”

- 1) That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
- 2) and that he was buried;
- 3) and that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures;
- 4) and that he was seen by Cephas and the Twelve.

These four lines comprise a summary statement of beliefs  
that are not found in Scripture until they land in this letter from Paul.  
(Of course, Paul didn’t have a nicely compiled NT  
to work from when doing his theological teaching.)

These are simple, direct, and yet hugely meaningful statements.  
They are the basis for the more developed Apostles Creed  
that we find later on, and in my mind provide legitimacy  
for the practice of composing statements of belief.

For while these lines Paul references are not specifically quotations of Scripture,  
they clearly articulate the basic story of Jesus’ saving work  
in his death and resurrection.

We see Jesus referred to as, “Christ,” which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew,  
“Messiah.” This is the promised anointed king to be sent by God  
who would put things back the way they were intended.

We see the language of atonement in that he “died for our sins.”

Gordon Fee suggests that whoever made the connection  
between Jesus’ death and our sins being forgiven is the  
“founder of Christianity.”

“All the evidence points to Jesus himself, especially at the Last Supper  
with his interpretation of his death in the language of Isa. 53 as “for you.”

We see an emphasis on the totality of Jesus’ death –  
that he was buried, not merely conked out for a bit only to be revived.

We see highlighted the importance of both bodily resurrection  
as well as the presence of the Apostles as eye witnesses,  
including Cephas (more commonly known as Peter),  
who was a leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

Finally, we see two references to all of this being in continuity with  
and even in fulfillment of the Scriptures given to Israel,  
so that this is not a new thing that has overtaken the old,  
but rather the culmination of God’s plan all along.

That’s quite a lot to pack into just four lines.

So...why did the early church create this brief collection of teachings  
and pass it on to Paul, who then passed it on to the Corinthians?

One key reason is to provide a kind of compass for people to know  
where they were in the world, and what direction to orient themselves.

Our guide through this study on worship, Jeffrey Greenman,  
quotes Don Sailors in Pedagogy of Praise:

“When worship occurs, people are characterized,  
given their life and their fundamental location and orientation  
in the world.” (p. 44)

That is to say that when you leave a time of corporate worship  
you should have a better sense of how you fit in the world,  
where you belong, where you don't belong,  
what is upside-down about things  
and what is really right-side-up  
(or as my kids sometimes say, "up-side-up").

The use of creeds in worship helps us with this.

Fair enough. But if we already have some creeds in the Bible,  
why not just use them?  
What is the need for making new statements of belief?

The reason the church has provided over the centuries is that,  
while the good news of Jesus Christ never changes,  
the world into which that good news is announced does change.

We use creeds or confessions to locate ourselves as the people of God  
being shaped by the good news of Jesus Christ *in our present circumstances*.

For example, during our series on the book of Daniel at the beginning of this year,  
we used a portion of a creed each week in worship.

In this way we worked through a majority of the  
Theological Declaration of Barmen (written in Germany in 1934)  
as well as the Belhar Confession  
(written in South Africa in 1982 during apartheid)

These creeds, like others, were guides to help the church navigate  
specific issues and concerns of the day, in hopes of preventing  
the church from being shipwrecked.

Greenman suggests that creeds show us how our smaller stories find their place  
within a much larger framing story, or narrative. He writes,

"This narrative tells us where we are and when we are living.  
We are in God's world: created, redeemed, being redeemed,  
and awaiting full redemption.

We are living between the times, between the time of Jesus's coming  
and Jesus's return in judgement. This is the context  
for every aspect of our daily lives.

Our moral lives are found in this landscape  
and in this time zone." (p. 50)

So the value of creeds and confessions is to provide a common language  
to help us articulate what faith looks like *now*  
in the situations we are facing today.

They also help us understand where the church has come from over time,  
and enable our faith to stay in continuity with historical, biblical beliefs  
that would otherwise be difficult to access.

The Apostle Paul passed along a faithful summary of what God had done through  
Jesus Christ that directly connected with forming the First Century church's  
character and identity.

To close our reflection today, I want us to share in the reading  
of a much more recent creed – a Brief Statement of Faith,  
written by the PC(USA) in 1983 at the occasion  
of bringing together the Southern and Northern Presbyterian  
churches that had been split along the lines  
of the civil war for more than a century.

As we do so, let's ask God to remind us of who we are,  
and how we fit in the midst of the world as it now sits in 2017.

A creed of the PC(USA)

### **Brief Statement of Faith, PC(USA) 1983**

In life and in death we belong to God.  
**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.**

We trust in Jesus Christ,  
Fully human, fully God.  
**Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:  
preaching good news to the poor  
and release to the captives,  
teaching by word and deed  
and blessing the children,  
healing the sick  
and binding up the brokenhearted,  
eating with outcasts,  
forgiving sinners,  
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.**  
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,  
Jesus was crucified,  
suffering the depths of human pain  
and giving his life for the sins of the world.  
**God raised this Jesus from the dead,  
vindicating his sinless life,  
breaking the power of sin and evil,  
delivering us from death to life eternal.**

We trust in God,  
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.  
**In sovereign love God created the world good  
and makes everyone equally in God's image  
male and female, of every race and people,  
to live as one community.**  
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.  
**Ignoring God's commandments,  
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,  
accept lies as truth,  
exploit neighbor and nature,  
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.**  
We deserve God's condemnation.  
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.  
**In everlasting love,  
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people  
to bless all families of the earth.**  
**Hearing their cry,  
God delivered the children of Israel  
from the house of bondage.**  
**Loving us still,  
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.**  
**Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,  
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,  
God is faithful still.**

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,  
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,  
and binds us together with all believers  
in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,  
engages us through the Word proclaimed,  
claims us in the waters of baptism,  
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,  
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

**In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, **"Come, Lord Jesus!"**

**With believers in every time and place,  
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death  
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.**