

Acts 2: 29-36

The Apostles Creed

Delivered June 6, 2010

I want to tell you a story that is not written in scripture—yet it is part of our Christian tradition. I've embellished this somewhat, forgive me for taking some poetic license. The story goes like this:

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enthused the disciples so that they were ready and eager to spread the news of Christ's coming and resurrection. They excited the folks in Jerusalem at Pentecost with their stories of the gospel. Well, the sad news is that always in life, after a time of excitement, there follows a time of sadness. The Apostles were birthing a new religion, and now, after this first big bru-ha-ha at Pentecost, they were experiencing post partum blues—Peter especially, since he had always been the most emotional of the bunch.

Then, too, the disciples remembered Jesus' mandate to go and make disciples of all nations. They would eventually have to go beyond the gates of the city of Jerusalem. Each in a different direction. Very soon they would have to take leave of one another. For these reasons Peter suggested that they once again gather in the familiar upper room. There they could support one another in this sad time, and they could say their goodbyes. That is exactly what the disciples did. They trudged up the stairs to that upper room slowly, heavily—someone passed around a loaf of bread, someone else uncorked a bottle of wine, and they remembered their last supper with Jesus. Then they talked. They talked long into the night. Sometime during their time together, it occurred to them that they might not be on the same page as far as the good news was concerned. Remember, no gospel accounts had been written yet. How could the disciples be sure that what Philip one day would be preaching in Samaria was the same thing that Peter one day would be preaching in Rome? Andrew just happened to have a pen and piece of papyrus handy, so he became the self appointed scribe for the group. The others dictated while Andrew scratched out, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, the resurrection of the flesh." They might not agree on the finer points of theology—but at least everyone could agree on that. Their statement was 30 words long, easy to memorize. Then as day began to break over the city of Jerusalem, the Apostles engaged in one final group hug, wiped away some tears, and took off for different parts of the globe.

Thus came into being the first version of the Apostles' Creed. Sounds good, right?

Now, I hate to pop your balloon, but the truth of the matter is, the Apostles' Creed **wasn't** written by the Apostles. The name, "Apostles' Creed" is a misnomer originating the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages some well intentioned soul, I'm sure, made up the story that the **Apostles** wrote the Creed. In fact, the Creed, as we know it today, developed over many centuries beginning in the second century when the Apostles were already long gone from this earth. The Apostles Creed was fussed over by many, many generations of Christians until it reached its final form probably in the 9th century. Most of the fussing happened at meetings of the church hierarchy—long, excruciating meetings where argument time far surpassed prayer time and there was as much bad will as good will among the participants. Politics and theology are Siamese twins—joined at the hip; don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Someone has said that all of our church creeds, of which there are more than a dozen, were written in times of crisis. This is not wholly true. At least one creed, the Westminster Catechism, was written as a teaching tool. But by far the majority of our creeds were written in times of crisis. Same thing goes for our national creeds. Yes, the pledge of allegiance is primarily a teaching tool, but others were composed to offer us clarity of thought and purpose when our patriotism was being challenged:: We hold these truths to be self evident—written at the start of the American Revolution, right? Four score and seven years ago... written when this country was torn apart by the Civil War. Just like these, the Apostles Creed was written to preserve our faith and beliefs during times when our faith and beliefs were being tested or challenged.

As a for instance, in the second century AD when the essentials of the faith were still being worked out, a man named Marcion purposed that Christianity had nothing to do with Judaism. "The God described in the Old Testament is punishing, and full of wrath; the God that Jesus spoke of, on the other hand, is loving and caring," so said Marcion. According to this man, Jesus was NOT the long awaited messiah as foretold by Jewish prophets. Jesus came to tell the world about a whole other God. Jesus' message refuted Judaism—in fact, it was anti-Jewish.

Marcion got busy collecting a lot of New Testament material—before there was such a thing as a New Testament. He included in HIS canon ten of Paul's letters, ten which he interpreted as being fairly free and clear of Jewish thought and theology, and he included the gospel of Luke. Well, I say Marcion's canon included the gospel of Luke, but not ALL of the gospel of Luke. The first chapter of Luke was too Jewish for him—remember, the first chapter of Luke gives Jesus' geneology—It starts with Abraham and continues on to mention that Jesus was descended from King David, and King Josiah, and King Zerubbabel—in other words Jesus was descended from

Jews—important Jews. Furthermore, in the first chapter of Luke we learn that Jesus' mother was Jewish. What, certainly Mary, the Holy mother of God, can't be Jewish!

Our church fathers rightly determined that Marcion's ideas were wrong.

Unfortunately, though, Marcion had a following. How do you make it clear to the masses what it is that true Christians believe? Well, one way the church fathers did that was by adding a line to a then, extremely short Apostles Creed. The thirty word creed I read you earlier. After "I believe in God, the father, the Almighty; and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son our Lord, they added, "Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, **born of the Virgin Mary.**" By adding that line, the church fathers were honoring the birth narrative in Luke. By adding that line the church fathers also left no question in anyone's mind that Jesus' mother was Jewish therefore Jesus was Jewish. In order to further refute Marcion, those same church fathers got busy collecting material for a Bible that they would claim as Orthodox—the true Bible—that Bible which we use today and which includes all the extant letters of Paul PLUS ALL the chapters in Luke, PLUS the books of the Hebrew Testament. Take that you heretical, bigoted Marcion, you!

One other debate that led to an addition in the Apostles' Creed, I will mention here. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians in North Africa were brutally persecuted for their faith. Some Christians held firm, enduring extreme torture and even death. Others caved under pressure—they renounced their faith. The folks who caved were called lapsed Christians. After the persecutions ended, some lapsed Christians were remorseful. They repented for their crimes against the faith. Then, they asked to be brought back into the fold. What should be done? On one side of the debate were those who said, "Absolutely not! We are closing our church doors to you. Our faith must remain pure. If you were not willing to be martyred, then you don't belong here." We can see why good Christians who had suffered through so much, would say that, of course.

On the other side of the debate were those who stressed forgiveness as key to Christian community. And we can understand that perspective, too, good Christians who we are. Who won out? Well, let us look to our creed: It tells us: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." That line was added to remind folks that yes, we forgive even those fifth century lapsed Christians in North Africa.

And so it goes. The parts of the Apostles Creed were added piece meal over eight centuries in response to crisis—in response to various challenges to the faith.

It should be remembered, however, that although our creeds have a great deal of authority—they have nowhere NEAR the authority of scripture. We say that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Our creeds, though, including the Apostles' Creed, are **human** documents. They were written by faithful Christians like you and me. As someone has said, "confessions and declarations are subordinating standards of the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as scripture bears

witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable ((preface to the Confession of 1997). Remember we are the reformed church—reformed and always reforming.

At Charlottesville's downtown mall, there's a chalkboard wall in front of the City Hall upon which folks are encouraged to write—I've heard it referred to as Charlottesville's free speech or freedom wall—We might think of the Apostles' Creed as a kind of faith wall—upon which Christian saints through hundreds of years have written their most basic beliefs regarding the faith. Every time we say the Apostles' Creed particularly, it is like we are reading from that faith wall.

When we recite the Creed, then, as we will recite it in just a few minutes, we are reminded, as we are on All Saints Day, that we stand in a long line of faithful Christians—we owe them our thanks for the faith we practice today. Amen