

Believe in God? Really?

Sermon Notes

David A. Renwick, January 8, 2016
National Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC

The Apostles' Creed – Historical Background

(abbreviated from The Book of Confessions, PCUSA)

Although not written by apostles, the Apostles' Creed reflects the theological formulations of the first century church.

The creed's structure is Trinitarian and focuses on God as Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a time when most Christians were illiterate, oral repetition of the Apostles' Creed, along with the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, helped preserve and transmit the faith of the western churches. Candidates for membership in the church, having undergone a lengthy period of moral and doctrinal instruction, were asked at baptism to state what they believed. They responded in the words of this creed.

Around A.D. 180, Roman Christians developed an early form of the Apostles' Creed especially to refute a Christian living in Rome called Marcion. Marcion read the Old Testament as referring to a tyrannical God who had created a flawed world (in which physical matter was at the least unimportant, and at the most evil, not to be touched or seen as of spiritual importance). Marcion believed that Jesus revealed, in contrast, a good God of love and mercy, not interested in the material world. For Marcion, Jesus was not the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets; and the Old Testament was not Scripture. Marcion proposed limiting Christian "Scripture" to Luke's gospel (less the birth narrative and other parts that he felt expressed material or Old Testament thinking) and to those letters of Paul that Marcion regarded as anti-Old Testament. Marcion's views developed into a movement that lasted several centuries. In the face of Marcion's beliefs, the church formulated the Apostles' Creed. The Creed affirmed that the Father of Jesus Christ is the God of creation, who created, loved and entered the material world. The creed emphasized the fact that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried and raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he rules with the Father. It also affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, the importance of the church, and the resurrection of the body.

Over time, the Apostles' Creed underwent further development. In response to the question of readmitting those who had denied the faith during the persecutions of the second and third centuries, the church added, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." In the fourth and fifth centuries, North African Christians debated the question of whether the church was an exclusive sect composed of the heroic few or an inclusive church of all who confessed Jesus Christ, leading to the addition of "holy" (belonging to God) and "catholic" (universal). In Gaul, in the fifth century, the phrase "he descended into hell" came into the creed. By the eighth century, the creed had attained its present form.

Follow Up Reading

1. The Reason for God, Timothy Keller, 2008.
2. Why There Almost Certainly is a God: Doubting Dawkins, Keith Ward, 2008 (The book is detailed philosophy; the video is easier: see <http://vimeo.com/10259981#>)
3. Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis, 1952
4. A Rumor of Angels Peter Berger, 1969.
5. God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, Christopher Hitchens, 2007
6. The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins, 2006.

Previous Sermons by Dr. Renwick (*use "search" on the NPC website*)

God: Are The Atheists Right? September 2, 2012

<http://www.nationalpres.org/god-are-you-there>

God: Are You There? September 13, 2010

<http://www.nationalpres.org/god-are-you-there>

OUTLINE

Do You Believe in God?

1. Many Do Not! Growing numbers of people feel free to express doubt/unbelief: e.g. Bart Ehrmann, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pxz4eyR9U5w>) and Bart Campolo (www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/.../the-evangelical-scion-who-stopped-believing.html) by Mark Oppenheimer.
2. I Believe! Two of My Main Reasons
 - i. Math: the language (especially "1s" and "0s") filling the universe
 - ii. The Universal need for an Infinite Lover: relationships and love as the primary source of meaning for all human beings.

But Which God? – (see Psalm 8, 19, 23, etc.)

1. Great: Almighty, Maker -- Above all.
2. Personal: Father -- Accommodating to our humanity

Problems

- The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Good and Beauty!
- The Problem of Creation since Darwin – Genesis 1 (*Why? Not How?*)

Think of Genesis as Hebrew poetry "parallelism" = "rhyming"

DAY 1 "Let there be light"; and there was light.

DAY 4 "Let there be lights in the sky to separate the day from the night;

DAY 2 "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."

DAY 5 "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."

DAY 3 Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit" . . .

DAY 6 Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind. See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.