SERMONS ON THE APOSTLES' CREED

HERMAN HOEKSEMA

Edited by Marco Barone



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Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's emphasis.

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INTRODUCTION

hy should we bother with the Apostles' Creed? The Creed is made up of about 110 words in the English language. The book by Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965) that the reader currently holds is a collection of thirty-eight sermons on the Creed, with a total count of almost 110,000 words. One might think that Hoeksema was perhaps overdoing it in delivering so many sermons on such a brief, old document. Why dedicate so much time and thought to the Creed?

There are at least three possible reasons that help us understand why Hoeksema considered it appropriate to dedicate so much time to an exposition of the Creed.

1. The historical importance of the Apostles' Creed

None of Christ's apostles had any role in the Creed's composition, since it was many years after the apostolic era that the creed had its origins.¹ Nevertheless, the Creed can be so named because it is a faithful summary of biblical teaching. The Creed has been used for many purposes,² and it is an ideal summary of the faith of the universal Christian church.³ The Creed unites all believers through the ages in one faith.⁴ To this day, the Creed is a tool toward a clear understanding of the Christian faith.⁵

Throughout the history of the church, many preachers and theologians produced commentaries or expositions of the Creed. ⁶ The Reformers

¹ For a short history of the origin, development, and uses of the Creed see Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 1:14–23.

² Cf. Cornelis P. Venema, What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship,1996), 9–10; J. I. Packer, Affirming the Apostles' Creed (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 17–23.

³ Cf. Venema, What We Believe, 13.

⁴ Cf. R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), xv.

⁵ Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Apostles' Creed: A Faith to Live By* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 6.

⁶ For instance: Rufinus of Aquileia, Augustine of Hippo, Quodvultdeus of Carthage, Thomas Aquinas, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Heinrich Bullinger, Caspar Olevianus, Herman Witsius. and William Perkins.

defended the value and role of the Creed for the church.⁷ For his *Institutes*, Calvin followed the order of the Apostles' Creed.⁸ Martin Luther included explanations of the Creed in his *Smaller Catechism* and *Larger Catechism*, both included in the authoritative source of Lutheran doctrine, *The Book of Concord* of 1580.

As a Reformed preacher and theologian, Hoeksema recognized the historical importance of the Creed. He subscribed to and loved the Heidelberg Catechism and its explanation of the Creed found in Lord's Days 7–22. However, the Creed was not intended to be a full and systematic exposition on the Christian faith, and Hoeksema was aware of the importance as well as the limits of the Creed.

It [the Creed] professes faith in the triune God; yet it does not expressly mention the Trinity, far less declare any specific doctrine concerning the relation of the persons of the Trinity to the divine essence. All the important doctrines of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are expressed here. All the salient doctrines of salvation are professed in this *credo*...But they are all stated simply as so many facts of the gospel, without as much as suggesting their dogmatic implications. And the same is true of the article concerning the Holy Spirit, the church, and the benefits of Christ's work, such as the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. (page 4)

Thus, "if men appeal to the Creed as a proof of their orthodoxy, they are of course bound to explain its meaning." That is what Hoeksema does in the sermons found in this book. And that we can consider to be the first reason why our author dedicated significant time to the exposition of the Creed.

⁷ Cf. Michael Horton, We Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles' Creed (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 8.

⁸ Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 2.16.18.

⁹ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1970), 296–698; *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism: Volume* 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971), 3–315.

¹⁰ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology: Vol. 1*, in *The Works of William Cunningham: Vol. 2* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1864), 89.

INTRODUCTION

2. Subscribing to and reciting the Apostles' Creed

Subscribing to and reciting the Creed is a very serious act. On the one hand, the opening words are not "we believe" but "I believe," and each worshipper talks for himself or herself.¹¹ On the other hand, in corporate worship, the many *I believe* becomes *we believe*.¹² Moreover, subscribing to and reciting the Creed is "a solemn pledge of allegiance." In fact, the Creed "boldly declares that there is truth that is foundational to life, a truth that cannot be compromised without the peril of falling into the abyss of meaning-lessness." Understandably, the Creed has been called "the extreme text of self-examination" because it "presses the question of whether a person is willing to adopt *the* faith expressed in the Creed as *my* faith." ¹⁶

Hoeksema also realized the intensely personal nature of the Creed.

This confession is definitely personal. Faith is a personal matter, a matter of the heart. And therefore, from the outset I want to strike a personal note, and confront you with the question: "Do you? Do you know what you are saying, when you confess, 'I believe in God'? And giving yourselves account of the contents of your speech, can you repeat these words from the heart, 'I believe in God'?" (page 5)

Hoeksema was well aware of the importance of the Creed, not only for the body of Christ as a whole, but also for the life and calling of the individual Christian.

3. The contents and beauty of the Apostles' Creed

In the statements of the Creed, Hoeksema perceived a unique and simple beauty that cannot pass unnoticed.

¹¹ Cf. Packer, Affirming the Apostles' Creed, 29.

¹² Cf. Mohler, The Apostles' Creed, xxii.

¹³ Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press: 2018), 5.

¹⁴ R. C. Sproul, What We Believe: Understanding and Confessing the Apostles' Creed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 10.

¹⁵ Helmut Thielicke, *I Believe: The Christian's Creed* (Philadelphia: PA: Fortress Press, 1968), xi.

¹⁶ Stanley D. Gale, *The Christian's Creed: Embracing the Apostolic Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 4.

There is something charming about this simple and beautiful confession of faith to which the whole Christian church subscribes. It is very brief, yet quite comprehensive, expressing all the main truths of revelation that are necessary for a Christian to believe. Its form is wholly positive, and not controversial...It is a declaration of the historical facts of the gospel, rather than an abstract statement of doctrine. (page 4)

One could hardly disagree. The Creed is a product of the attempt of the ancient church to clearly declare what is "true, essential, and splendid—splendid because they allow the splendor of truth and the splendor of Christ to be fully seen." Though the Creed "cannot be taken in itself as a complete expression of what we hold in regard to the facts of our Faith," it nevertheless "brings before us those facts in their simple majesty." 18

Regarding the first article of the Creed, Hoeksema jubilantly exclaims: "How beautiful and rich is that first article of the apostolic confession: 'I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" (page 9). The reader will regularly perceive Hoeksema's love for the truths he is expounding.

Conclusion

I hope that this introduction has explained some of the reasons why the Creed deserves the attention that Hoeksema gave to it.

Through his exposition of this important document, Hoeksema guides the reader to the life-changing contemplation of the triune God and his work in Christ. Hoeksema very often expresses awe at the beauty and spiritual glory of the divine truths conveyed by the Creed, sometimes in a contagious way. In fact, he has communicated that awe to this editor too, and it is my hope that his sermons may also be a blessing to the reader.

-Marco Barone

¹⁷ Mohler, The Apostles' Creed, xx.

¹⁸ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Historic Faith: Short Lectures on the Apostles' Creed* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1890), vii.

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Large across the sermons in this book while looking through the online sermon archive of the Reformed Witness Hour (RWH), a Protestant Reformed radio program founded in October 1941 and still broadcasting today. As I browsed the archive, my attention was quickly caught by a sermon series by Herman Hoeksema titled "The Apostles' Creed." I was able to find the transcripts of these sermons in the library of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in Wyoming, Michigan. Knowing something about the theological and historical importance of the Apostles' Creed, I decided to photocopy the sermon transcripts and propose them for publication to the Reformed Free Publishing Association. This book is the result of that discovery, or, more correctly, rediscovery.

Hoeksema delivered the sermons collected in this book during the weeks he served as the radio pastor of the RWH in the years 1951, 1952, 1954, and 1955. In addition to the sermons belonging to that series, I have included in the appendices of this book two related RWH sermons by Hoeksema, which do not formally belong to his Apostles' Creed series. I have done this, first, because Hoeksema explicitly mentions and quotes the Apostles' Creed in these two sermons, and second, to offer readers more material by the same author on the "apostolic confession," as Hoeksema himself often calls it.

Regarding editorial changes, I as editor and the copyeditors involved with this book have fully respected both the wording and the meaning of the transcripts of Hoeksema's original sermons, even where the language or the syntax is archaic or where the terms used may sound awkward to contemporary readers. Only the following changes have been made:

- 1) Obvious typos and grammatical mistakes have been corrected;
- 2) Scripture references and references to other works have been added where Hoeksema does not provide them;
- 3) A few explanatory footnotes have been added (all footnotes are mine);

- 4) Occasional phrases related to the timeframe in which Hoeksema's sermons were delivered have been omitted (for example, "in this present radio season," "last year in our radio ministry," "Last year till the 20th of February, as some of you probably will remember," and similar). These have been omitted for two reasons:
 - a. These phrases make the reading of the written text cumbersome and more difficult;
 - b. They neither add to nor take anything away from the author's messages.

The above has resulted in no change whatsoever to the meaning the author wanted to convey. The reader can be assured that he is reading Hoeksema's own words as recorded in the original transcripts of RWH sermons. May the reader be blessed in his reading.

—Marco Barone

BROADCAST TIMELINE

1951

I Believe in God — 10/14

The Father Creator — 10/21

The Lord of All -10/28

The Name Jesus — 11/04

Jesus the Christ — 11/11

The Only Begotten Son — 11/18

Christ Our Lord — 11/25

Born of a Virgin — 12/02

Christ in Our Nature — 12/09

God and Man — 12/16

Christ Bearing the Wrath of God -12/30

1952

Active Suffering All His Life — 01/06

Suffered Under Pontius Pilate — 01/13

The Death of the Accursed Tree — 01/20

Dead and Buried — 01/27

Our Temporal Death — 02/03

Reconciled to God — 02/10

Everlasting Righteousness — 02/17

Crucified with Christ — 02/24

The Descension into Hell - 03/02

Christ Is Risen — 03/09

The Power of Christ's Resurrection — 03/16

The Wonder of the Resurrection — 03/23

The Meaning of the Resurrection of Christ — 03/30

1954

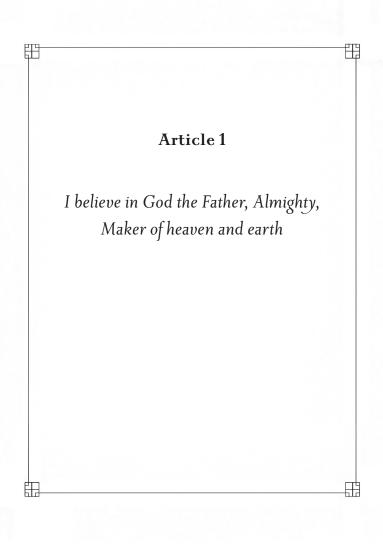
Ascended into Heaven — 12/05 The Fruit of Christ's Ascension — 12/12 Exalted at the Right Hand of God — 12/19

1955

The Coming of the Lord — 01/09
God's Righteous Judgment in the Present Time — 01/16
The Final Judgment — 01/23
The Holy Ghost — 01/30
The Spirit of Christ — 02/06
The Church: the Body of Christ — 02/13
The Church Chosen to Everlasting Life — 02/20
The Communion of the Saints — 11/06
The Forgiveness of Sins — 11/13
The Resurrection of the Body — 11/20
Eternal Life — 11/27

APPENDICES

Conceived by the Holy Ghost (Appendix 1) — 12/10/1950The Power of His Resurrection (Appendix 2) — 04/18/1954



Chapter 1

I BELIEVE IN GOD

It is my purpose, the Lord willing, to discuss with you the main truths of the Christian faith, as they are expressed by the church from ancient times in what is known as the Apostles' Creed. This apostolic confession is well-known to all that call themselves Christians. Nevertheless, I will repeat it, and ask you to repeat it with me, and speak in your hearts as follows:

- 1. I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;
- 2. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord;
- 3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary;
- 4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell;
- 5. The third day he rose again from the dead;
- 6. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
- 7. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead;
- 8. I believe in the Holy Ghost.
- 9. I believe an holy catholic church; the communion of saints;
- 10. The forgiveness of sins;
- 11. The resurrection of the body;
- 12. And the life everlasting. Amen.¹

Before I enter into the contents of this confession, I wish to make a few general remarks. In the first place, this so-called Apostles' Creed is a

¹ This and all the quotations of the Apostles' Creed that Hoeksema makes are from *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian Psalter (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995), 80.

very ancient confession of faith by the church. Although its origin lies in the dark, and although it cannot be determined who is the author of the creed, we know that it is one of the oldest confessions that was ever written. The report that it was composed by the twelve apostles, and even that each of the apostles wrote one of the articles, is, of course, a myth. And it is not even to be regarded as a beautiful myth. For it was not the calling of the apostles to compose creeds, but they were instruments of revelation and the inspired preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is something charming about this simple and beautiful confession of faith to which the whole Christian church subscribes. It is very brief, yet quite comprehensive, expressing all the main truths of revelation that are necessary for a Christian to believe. Its form is wholly positive, and not controversial. In this creed the church professes her faith apparently without considering the possibility of its being gainsaid or the necessity of defending the truth over against heretics. It is a declaration of the historical facts of the gospel, rather than an abstract statement of doctrine.

It professes faith in the triune God; yet it does not expressly mention the Trinity, far less declare any specific doctrine concerning the relation of the persons of the Trinity to the divine essence. All the important doctrines of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are expressed here. All the salient doctrines of salvation are professed in this *credo*, such as the divinity of Christ, his virgin birth, his humiliation and exaltation, and his expected return on the clouds of heaven. But they are all stated simply as so many facts of the gospel, without as much as suggesting their dogmatic implications. And the same is true of the article concerning the Holy Spirit, the church, and the benefits of Christ's work, such as the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Indeed, well may it be said that every Christian subscribes to this very ancient confession of the church, and that he who does not subscribe to the whole of it cannot be called a Christian.

These few remarks must suffice to introduce my series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed. And now I will pass at once into a discussion of its content.

The first of the twelve articles reads: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." In the present sermon I will

I BELIEVE IN GOD

call your attention only to the first four words of this article: "I believe in God."

Notice, in the first place, that this confession is definitely personal. Faith is a personal matter, a matter of the heart. And therefore, from the outset I want to strike a personal note, and confront you with the question: "Do you? Do you know what you are saying, when you confess, 'I believe in God'? And giving yourselves account of the contents of your speech, can you repeat these words from the heart, 'I believe in God'?" I do not hesitate to say that if this is true, you are a Christian.

Let me be permitted to explain this statement.

First of all, I wish to emphasize the fact that the confession, "I believe in God," is by no means the same as saying, "I believe that God is, or that God exists." The faith that God exists is common to all men, without exception. I say this advisedly and emphatically. There are no real atheists. I am well aware of the fact that there are men who profess to be atheists, that is, those who attempt to convince themselves that there is no God, and who make that purely negative profession theirs. Others, who are very closely related to the atheists, call themselves agnostics, and claim that if there be a God, we cannot possibly have any knowledge of him. Still others meet God and his knowledge with a shrug of the shoulders. They do not say that God is not. Neither do they positively aver that God is unknowable. But they are proud in expressing a doubt concerning the knowledge of God, and call themselves skeptics.

I am convinced, on the basis of Holy Writ, that all these attitudes of the atheists and agnostics and skeptics are nothing but the lie of fools. It is according to the Bible the fool says in his heart: "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). But in this attempt he will never succeed. God does not permit man to deny him, no matter what proud philosophy he may imagine in his heart. And the only result is that they become the objects of God's fierce wrath:

- 18. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;
- 19. Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

20. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:18–20)

No man will ever be able to rid himself of the conviction that God is.

Nor do I say that you are a Christian because you probably believe that there is a god. The sinner is inclined to make a god of his own, a god unto himself. This is true of paganism or polytheism, with its many gods. Romans 1:21–23,

- 21. Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.
- 22. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,
- 23. And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

But it is not only the pagans that grope in the darkness of their polytheism that form a god unto their own image and according to their own imagination. The modern and civilized heathen commits the same error. One does not have to make images of silver and gold, or wood and stone, and bow before them in order to make his own god. Also the proud philosophy that is called pantheism commits the same error. Pantheism professes to believe that God is all, and all is God. And this proud philosophy culminates in the imagination that man is God, or that God reaches his highest consciousness in man. Nor is the god of the deist the true God, in whom we must believe in order to be a Christian. Deism professes a god that is far above the world, but is not in the world; a god indeed that has created the world, but after having created it made that world self-sufficient, running according to its own laws. The god of deism is really one with whom we can have no contact, no fellowship, whom we do not have to fear, because he is forever separated from us.

And so, even the modern heathen fashions many gods of his own imagination. Such, for instance, is a god that is only love, in the

I BELIEVE IN GOD

sentimental sense of the word: a god of love without holiness, and a god of mercy without righteousness and justice. Or we make a god of our own imagination when we think of him as depending upon the will of man. All these gods are creatures of our own imagination, and therefore lies.

But when I say that you are a Christian when you can say from the heart, "I believe in God," I imply two things.

First of all, I mean to emphasize that by this confession you state that God is God, and that you know him as the true God. Who is God? My answer is briefly: he is the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the revelation that is contained in the holy Scriptures, and in the light of which we hear and interpret the speech of God in all his works. We of ourselves can never say who and what God is. What we say of ourselves concerning God is always a lie. We can never approach him who is in an inaccessible light. If we are to know him, he must approach us. We can never speak of ourselves concerning him, but must be silent when he speaks. For he is the infinite one, and the finite can never approach the infinite.

But God revealed himself, that is, he spoke concerning himself to us in language which we could understand. He spoke to his people from the very beginning of history in the holy gospel, which was realized in the fullness of time in our Lord Jesus Christ. That holy gospel has been preserved for us in Holy Writ. Through that holy gospel we know him as God. He is the Infinite One, whom the heaven and the heaven of heavens can never contain. He is the Eternal One, in whom and for whom there do not exist the limits of time. He is the Immutable One, with whom there is no change or shadow of turning. He is the Immense One, the omnipresent God, who is transcendent above all creation, yet immanent in all things. He is the Almighty One, who does whatsoever he pleases. And he is the sovereign Lord of all, in heaven and on earth. Moreover, he is the Holy One, completely consecrated to himself, the God of absolute love, who loves himself above all and all creatures for his own name's sake. He is absolute righteousness, whose will is always in harmony with his own perfect goodness. And he is gracious and merciful, full of lovingkindness and truth to them that fear him. He is the Jehovah, the immutable I Am, the Rock in whom we may trust.

For that God, that has revealed himself in the holy gospel and in

whom the Christian believes, is the God of our salvation. He has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God come into the flesh, God of God, Immanuel. In that holy gospel he has revealed himself as the reconciler, who in the cross of Christ was reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. And in that same holy gospel he revealed all the glory of his power unto salvation, by raising our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and exalting him above all that is named, not only in this world, but also in the world that is to come. He is our deliverer from the power of guilt and sin and death, who through his Holy Spirit applies all the blessings of salvation to us and makes us partakers of life eternal. And when the Christian says, "I believe in God," he refers to none other than the God that has thus revealed himself, in the holy gospel, as it is preserved for us in Holy Writ.

But, secondly, we must not overlook the fact that the confession does not say, "I believe that God is," but, "I believe *in* God." To be a Christian, it is certainly not sufficient to believe that God exists, not even that the God that has revealed himself in Scripture exists. But he must and does believe *in* God. And that means that by faith he stands in a very intimate personal relation with that God whom he knows from the holy gospel. He knows him, not as a matter purely of the intellect, not as a matter of doctrine only, but as a matter of the heart. He that professes that he believes in God thereby declares that God is *his* God; that he is *his* redeemer, who forgives all *his* sins; that he is his reconciler, who placed him in the state of perfect justification; that he is *his* deliverer from all the dominion of sin and death.

He knows him with a personal, spiritual knowledge of love. And so, by faith he trusts in him, relies on him for time and eternity, in life and in death, confident that even as God has forgiven all his sins, so in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ he will raise him into everlasting life and glory. And thus, knowing God with a spiritual knowledge of love, and trusting in him as the God of his salvation, he also loves him in principle, loves him with all his heart and mind and soul and strength, forsakes the world and sin, fights the good fight of faith, walks in the light, and declares the praises of him that called him out of darkness into his marvelous light, glorifying the God of his salvation. I believe in God. Do you? Then, and then only, are you a Christian.