

## Creeds Seek to Answer Crucial Questions

It has been said that the church today is irrelevant. The church, especially confessional churches, churches like Lutheran, churches with historical creeds and confessions that act foundationally to theology and teaching... all of us ... are answering questions no one seems to be asking!

So, what are the key questions facing the church today? As I continue, let your mind wander a bit. We will come back to this... What are the key questions the church must be asking today? Or answering today?

Martin Luther was asking, “How do I find a merciful God?” He lived with a tradition that required him to fast and literally beat himself and confess every possible thing he had done or said or thought – every possible thing he should have done or said or thought... His faith and his faithful behavior were meant to appease God, to convince God to be merciful. Because God demanded obedience and punished disobedience. Luther was a scholar and a teacher, taking his faith extremely seriously. But there was no comfort in his practice. There was no reassurance in his thinking. There was no love for a God so frightening.

Then Luther discovered Galatians and Romans and Ephesians and a God who loved him ... and all people... and sought to embrace him and all people in grace. It is by grace we are saved. Hear the answer to Luther’s searching in the words of Ephesians 2:8-9 - “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not your own doing– it is the gift from God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Someone might still ask, “How do I find a merciful God?”

How can I be saved?

Saved from what?

Saved from whom?”

Someone says, “How do I believe in a heaven above – or a hell below – when I can plummet the depths of the ocean and the reaches of outer space, even light years away?”

Someone says, “I don’t understand how spilling blood, sacrificing life – either the life of animals or the life of a human being - can atone for spilling more blood, enslaving human beings, ignoring- worse- exploiting the poor and the vulnerable?”

Someone says, “So you have a personal relationship with a Jesus – and you are absolutely certain I do not – what difference does this make in justice and the care of the poor and the vulnerable?”

I say, “There are some tough questions out there!”

Why do we say the Creed week after week? Are we expected to believe every word, every line, and live by this?

Why do so called “faithful” people live with such division, such suspicion, such animosity toward one another and to the people down the street or around the world who do not believe as they do?

Someone asks, “Isn’t it enough to be good? To be kind? To be generous and helpful and.... nice?”

What’s it all about? Don’t bother! I have no time for this....”

I ask, “Are we asking the right questions? Do we have anything to say?”

What is a creed? What good is it? Why are there so many? Do we have to believe every one of them? Every line in them?

Beginning today and continuing through six weeks, we will explore the purpose and content of creeds or faith statements. I won’t give you all the answers because I don’t think we can put God or life or truth in a booklet or a doctrine. I certainly don’t have all the answers.

In fact, I think it is more faithful to ask all the questions!

Jesus did... “Who do you say that I am?”

Today we will begin looking at the three creeds we hold foundational to faith as Lutherans. Yes, three. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and what's the third one... the Athanasian Creed!

Why three? What's in them? You maybe have not thought about this since you took confirmation class or a class required before joining a congregation, maybe this congregation.

Perhaps someone told you, "To be one of us, you need to believe like us."

Can you believe it?

Let's ask some questions. Let's give this some examination. Let's see what a creed is – or might be – and what it is not.

We begin by realizing that *creeds have been written to answer critical questions of the time*.

The Apostles Creed is said to be the first creed of the church. That's not quite true. From the first century the basic statement of faith consisted of only three words: "Jesus is Lord."

But there is more to the story. There is more to be said. And what is said is not, "Well we *think...*" or "We *feel...*" This is a stronger statement – a statement of truth as they – we - know it! It is a simple summary of the gospel – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is not a confession, as though we need to apologize for these words, these commitments. This is a profession, a proclamation.

So to whom are we speaking? I think I was taught to bow my head, as though in prayer. This was – and is – important! But we are not speaking to God here. We are speaking to the world! So, we should really face the windows, not the altar. We should face the door through which we return to the world. We return to the world with a message – good news – something *to stake your life on!*

Now, I am not going to parse out every theological nugget in this creed. Today I want you to simply catch that each of our foundational creeds was meant to answer a critical question of the day. In this case... was Jesus truly human?

Look at what we say... Jesus was conceived by a woman by an act of God... Jesus was born of a particular woman at a particular time in a particular place... her name was Mary.. Jesus had a three-year ministry in a small middle-eastern country.... We don't say that right here... but we do say he suffered under the Roman official Pontius Pilate, governor of the province of Judea, under the reign of the emperor Tiberius, between 26 and 37 in the Christian era....

Jesus was crucified and he died.... There's more to be said about that... he was buried... and later versions of the creed added the words "he descended to the dead"... This has double weight, because it speaks to the divine power of Jesus to extend his saving power to the place of the dead, called Hades, not hell, in Greek understanding – a place where all the dead go when they die...but to his humanity, three days dead meant really dead... after three days putrefaction has more than begun... that's why raising Lazarus was so significant... he was really dead... Jesus was really dead....this was no conspiracy, no fake trick.... But he rose – or was raised....

See, there were other stories going around. The Roman emperor was understood to be the son of God... born under a special star... born to a virgin mother and a divine father... Sound familiar? So this creed in its day was saying something politically radical, not merely theologically interesting!

And other religions had stories of divine beings appearing to be human... or even appearing to be swans or bulls or other creatures, even human beings - but not really human.

Was Jesus really human? Yes! He was born... He lived in a particular time and a particular place, with other human beings... with historical records by the way... and he died.

But that's not the end of the story.

But then it might be natural to ask – and it was... “was Jesus really divine?”

So, the church gathered in convention in Nicea and wrote a statement of faith... and it was revised and revised between 325 and 381 CE until we have what we have today.

*Familiar words: Jesus is eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made...*

He came down from heaven... he became a man... he suffered and died and was buried... on the third day he rose... he ascended...and he sits at the right hand of God until that day when he will come again to judge the world... in other words he has divine authority over all the world... and his kingdom is and will be eternal...

The Holy Spirit comes from the Father... and from the Son... although this point is challenged by the Orthodox Church... and this Jesus is worshipped and glorified. This Jesus is divine!

So, wait, do Christians worship one God or three Gods? That was a question in another time!

And the Athanasian Creed professes the nature of the Trinity. One God, not three, but three persons.... Not in sequence or succession over time, as I was taught in Sunday School... First the Father... then centuries later, the Son, who came and went and will come again, but in the meantime, God is Spirit. No. Three persons, not human beings or three creatures... One, co-existing, acting together, in what Richard Rohr describes as the “divine dance.”

Hmmm. Has your mind quit? Are you totally befuddled? Think of this as close but not quite.... You are a son or daughter... and a parent... and a brother or sister... all at the same time... and more- you are a neighbor and an employee and a member of this organization or that.... All at once. But you are one.

*We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity...not dividing the divine being... but the deity is equal in glory, co-eternal in majesty...*

*Uncreated is the Father... uncreated is the Son... Uncreated is the Spirit...*

*The Father is infinite... the Son is infinite... the Holy Spirit is infinite...*

*Eternal is the Father... eternal is the Son... eternal is the Holy Spirit...*

And the creed goes on and on even more to reinforce the unity and diverse divinity.

It's a creed much too long to use in worship.

But the point is this... our creeds... from the simplicity of "Jesus is Lord"... to the complexity of the Athanasian Trinitarian formula... each creed answers a critical question of their day.

So I come back to the original question... what are the critical questions of our time and of this place? And are we answering them appropriately?

There is a duality that says... Someone says, *"I believe in science!" which seems to say one cannot believe in scripture? Or God?*

*Someone might ask, "Did God create in seven days? Or 13.8 billion years?? What difference does it make? Is creation continuing even now? Even in what might be the seventh mass extinction?*

*And speaking of a seventh mass extinction... is this an apocalyptic judgement by God, through which there will be generations of suffering and the destruction of life on earth? By God – God's doing!?*

*Or another version asserts that this is the Christian Zionist vision of Israel returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple, thereby destroying the Muslims, before ultimately destroying the Temple and the Jewish people? Then... then Christ returns!*

We would hope for that? Who is answering this question and how? And how much suffering will there be?

A different question asks, "What is God's "investment" in the global economy whereby all are fed, all are housed, all have education and health care... and God's abundance replaces the horrors of scarcity?"

Have you wondered, “What does the Incarnation have to bring to the table for the development of artificial intelligence?” A related question... we have artificial/ replacement body parts... from hips to knees to ears to eyes to skin... but are these wonderful advancements for the rich and powerful or for all? How do we decide?

Some would argue that these questions and others like them are “political” and not “religious”! Or- is that a powerful and deceptive duality?

What are the critical questions that keep you up at night?

What are the questions your children and grandchildren are asking?

Do you have to be alone and confused and silenced? Or, as a faith community, do we seek the Word in the world and the questions to hear and the words to speak?

Next week...” Helpful metaphors for understanding the place and purpose of Creeds.”

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