Handout for Apostles’ Creed – Session 1

Why do we even have creeds? Isn’t the Bible enough? I grew up in a tradition where pastors claimed that the Bible was enough, but we still had a creedal statement called “The Baptist Faith & Message” (which was too long to read together in a service) and a Church Covenant (which we rarely read in service but supposedly subscribed to when we joined the church). The attitude toward creeds was something like that reported in the introduction to a theology book on the Apostles’ Creed: “’No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.’” [Bird, Michael F., *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), p. 17.] A guy I went to college with (Rick Warren) even bought into this. Unfortunately, such a sentiment forms its own anti-creedal creed [Bird, p. 17.]. Even worse, it doesn’t take into account that creeds are based on the Bible and that the Bible contains creeds in various forms. In addition, it doesn’t take into consideration how one can end up with dueling creeds when one picks and chooses verses or passages to justify one’s own beliefs or prejudices.

According to Acts 8:37, the Ethiopian Eunuch affirms “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” as a prerequisite for baptism. Of course, some of you will notice that verse 37 only appears in some translations as a footnote [ASV, CEB, ESV, GNT, NEB, NIV, NRSV, and RSV] or in brackets [HCSB and NASB]. It is even a footnote in my Syriac New Testament. Why pay attention to the verse, then?

While many of the manuscripts which contain verse 37 in full do not appear until the 10-12th centuries, it is interesting to note that there is an Old Latin reference from the 4th century and the 9th century, as well as a Syriac manuscript suggested as the 7th century [though some scholars don’t admit this]. This suggests that the earliest Greek manuscripts probably didn’t have this verse, that it was an addition.

If you believe the Holy Spirit is involved in the handling of Scripture throughout the process, you know that I believe there was a reason why this was apparently added at a later date. It may be that a copyist was inspired to emphasize the need for believer’s baptism. Those elements of the church which did not emphasize believer’s baptism may have avoided inserting this verse. But considering it in this way is helpful. Well before the 4th century and definitely by the 9th-10th centuries, some within the church believed there needed to be some type of personal confession prior to baptism. That this is codified into the eunuch’s confession in Acts 8:37 suggests that personal creeds (“I believe”) were necessary wherever there was a chance for confusion and heresy. My former professor doesn’t think this statement was original, but does believe: “Nevertheless, its simplicity suggests its early date of composition, and it is agreed that it exemplifies the primitive custom of confessing Jesus as Christ and Lord at baptism, …” [Beasley-Murray, George R., *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981—original 1962), p. 101.]

A clearer picture of a personal creed during the apostolic period can be seen in 1 Corinthians 12:3 when a person who has had an authentic experience is supposed to say, “Jesus is Lord.” In fact, Jesus is Lord may be the earliest Christian confession. My late professor cites Romans 10:9’s admonition to confess “Jesus is Lord” as evidence for such a personal creed very likely used before baptism. Perhaps more convincing is his later citation of Acts 22:16 which combines baptism and confessing the Name (Beasley-Murray, p. 102.].

Indeed, Section 21 of The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus offers some interesting instructions on baptism which lead into some of the statements in the creed.

From “The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hyppolytus” prior to AD 235, paragraph or section 21.

[21.](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#teh21) ¹At cockcrow prayer shall be made over the water. ²The stream shall flow through the baptismal tank or pour into it from above when there is no scarcity of water; but if there is a scarcity, whether constant or[[111]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_111) sudden, then use whatever water you can find.

³They shall remove their clothing. ⁴And first baptize the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them. ⁵Then baptize the men, and last of all the women; they must first loosen their hair and put aside any gold or silver ornaments that they were wearing: let no one take any alien thing down to the water with them.

⁶At the hour set for the baptism the bishop shall give thanks over oil and put it into a vessel: this is called the “oil of thanksgiving”. ⁷And he shall take other oil and exorcise it: this is called “the oil of exorcism”. [The anointing is performed by a presbyter.][[112]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_112) ⁸A deacon shall bring the oil of exorcism, and shall stand at the presbyter’s left hand; and another deacon shall take the oil of thanksgiving, and shall stand at the presbyter’s right hand. ⁹Then the presbyter, taking hold of each of those about to be baptized, shall command him to renounce, saying:

I renounce thee, Satan, and all thy servants and all thy works.

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¹⁰And when he has renounced all these, the presbyter shall anoint him with the oil of exorcism, saying:

Let all spirits depart far from thee.

TEST¹¹Then, after these things, let him give him over to the presbyter[[113]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_113) who baptizes, and let the candidates stand in the water, naked, a deacon going with them likewise.[[114]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_114) ¹²And when he who is being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say thus:

Dost thou believe in God, the Father Almighty?[[115]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_115)

¹³And he who is being baptized shall say:

I believe.

¹⁴Then
LATholding his hand placed on his head, he shall baptize him once. ¹⁵And then he shall say:

Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right **47**hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead? ¹⁶And when he says:

I believe,

he is baptized again. ¹⁷And again he shall say:

Dost thou believe in [the] Holy Ghost, and the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?

¹⁸He who is being baptized shall say accordingly:

I believe,

and so he is baptized a third time.[[116]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm#fn_116)

¹⁹And afterward, when he has come up [out of the water], he is anointed by the presbyter with the oil of thanksgiving, the presbyter saying:

I anoint thee with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ.

²⁰And so each one, after drying himself, is immediately clothed, and then is brought into the church.

“In Rome the creed had grown to involve three questions which were poised to the candidate, and on the affirmation of which he was dipped in the water.” [Walker, Williston and Handy, Randy T. (rev.), *A History of the Christian Church: Third Edition* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), p. 58.] So, “The Apostles’ Creed probably emerged in Rome as an early statement of faith used at the baptism of new converts in the late second or early third century (ca. AD 215). [Bird, Michael F., *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), p. 25.]

Eventually, such smaller, personal confessions developed into the longer confession we know as the Apostles’ Creed [Richardson, Alan, “Creed, Creeds” in Davies, J. G. (ed.) *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976—original 1972), p. 156.] We know that there were some forms of creeds in early use. Even the heretic Marcion recorded that the words “Holy Church” were in the baptismal creed he had learned prior to his breach from the church in 145 [Burn, A. E., “Creeds and Articles (Ecumenical)” in Hastings, James, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics: Volume IV: Confirmation-Drama* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), p. 237.] Shortly thereafter (and at least before 240), Tertullian notes the rule of faith as including: God Almighty, Maker of the world, Jesus Christ the Son, born of Virgin Mary, crucified under Pilate, buried, raised on the third day, received into the heavens, sitting on the right hand of the Father, coming soon to judge quick and dead, and the resurrection of the flesh [Burn, p. 237.].

Keeping in mind the need to keep one’s core beliefs straight in the face of heresy, consider that a bishop named Marcellus was exiled from what was then his diocese in Ancyra (which is Ankara, capitol of Turkiye, today. He had fallen afoul of priests who followed the Arian heresy of denying the pre-existence of the Christ. To counteract this, he spent part of his two years in exile compiling what came to be known as the “Old Roman Creed.” [Bettenson, Henry, *Documents of the Christian Church: Second Edition* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1963—original 1943), p. 23. This dates around 337 and compares favorably with Rufinius the Aquileian, who ministered around 400 AD and compiled a creed which is essentially similar to the Old Roman Creed [Bettenson, pp. 23-24; Burn, p. 237.].

But I’m not the only one who believes that creeds were developed to counter problems in the churches. “Most of the creeds were written in response to some heresy or doctrinal controversy. We might say that the creeds are basically the written account of several relationship breakdowns in the early church.” [Bird, p. 23.] Where “I believe…” personal creeds were probably initiated in preparation for baptism, the “We believe…” communal creeds were “…promulgated with the authority of a council; its purpose was to define the true faith as over against the teaching of heretics.” [Richardson, p.156.] One of the great church historians of the 20th century admits that we don’t know just how far the Apostles’ Creed “…arose out of the desire to define and defend the main stream of mainstream of Christianity against the Gnostic efforts to divert it into other channels is not clear.” [Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Volume 1: The First Five Centuries: To 500 A.D.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970—original 1937), p. 341. [NOTE: Gnostics did not believe in the Incarnation, believing Jesus only “appeared” to be human.] Later, the same author suggests that it might have been in reaction to the Marcionites [Latourette, p. 346.]. [NOTE: Marcionites did not believe that

We see the creed appearing in bits and pieces throughout the 1st Millennium, but we don’t see the full creed as we see it today until it is quoted in two major sources of the 8th century [Burn, p. 238.].

This session is going to look at “God, the Father Almighty.”

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

I believe! What does that mean? Does it mean that I “think” something is true, even that something is probably true? Belief is inherently entwined with “trust,” also known as dependence. Have you ever heard of Charles Blondin, the 19th century French acrobat who crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope not once but close to 300 times? On at least one of those occasions, he carried his manager, Harry Colcord, on his back. He gave Harry the following instructions: “Look up, Harry.… you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death.”

I share that anecdote because there is an apocryphal account where Prince Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, saw Blondin cross the Falls three times when the prince was 18-years-old. In the apocryphal story, Bertie is asked if the prince believes Blondin could carry him safely across the Falls on his tightrope. Bertie declined and Harry Colcord was the nervous substitute. In reality, Prince Edward Albert saw Blondin push a wheelbarrow across the Falls and the acrobat offered to take Albert back across in the wheelbarrow. The prince agreed, but was talked out of it by his entourage.

I tell you that because authentic “belief” acts upon that belief. The manager’s experience is instructive. He was told not to try to save himself but to depend on Blondin. In the same way, if we “believe” in God the Father Almighty, that suggests that: a) we have a relationship with God as a parental authority and nurturer in our lives; b) we listen to what God says and we obey (or expect appropriate punishment for our eventual benefit); c) we have privileges and responsibilities as members of God’s family; and d) we have an extended family of relationships with God’s “sons and daughters.”

I also share it because authentic “belief” shouldn’t be dissuaded by popular opinion. Prince Bertie played it safe and took the word of his advisors. Hence, he missed out on the experience of a lifetime. To be honest, I would have chosen what he chose because Blondin, for all of his success, was only human and humans make mistakes. That experience of a lifetime could have ended his lifetime if Blondin lost his balance. For us, though, belief in the Father Almighty makes a difference because God doesn’t make mistakes and, when we depend on Him completely, He will see us through.

So, is “I believe in God the Father Almighty” biblical? Is it useful?

Let’s start with a brief questionnaire. Circle AGREE or DISAGREE (or NEVER for “never thought of it”).

1. Rarely is God described as “Father” in the Old Testament. AGREE DISAGREE NEVER
2. Israel is often described as “son” in the Old Testament. AGREE DISAGREE NEVER
3. Except for quoting Psalm 22:1 from the cross, the gospels never record Jesus addressing
God in prayer except as “My Father.” AGREE DISAGREE NEVER
4. Israel’s king sometimes prayed, “my Father.” AGREE DISAGREE NEVER
5. Jesus regularly claims to be the emissary of the Father AGREE DISAGREE NEVER

The idea of Father combined with Creator appears in Deuteronomy 32:6. Note the New International Version: “Is this the way you repay the LORD, you foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” [NIV] Yet, as one theologian summarizes it: “Rarely does the Old Testament describe God as a Father. When such language or imagery occurs, it portrays him as Father of creation (Deut. 32:6), or occasionally it depicts the king as his representative son (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26–29), but most often the imagery is that the nation of Israel is his corporate “son” (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 3:19; 31:9). God is a compassionate Father who cares for his people (Ps. 103:13; Hos. 11:1–4), displaying particular fatherly concern for widows, the fatherless, and the desperate (Ps. 68:4–6). The practice of referring to God as Father of individual believers really begins in the New Testament.” [Kapic, Kelly M.. *The God Who Gives: How the Trinity Shapes the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010), p. 144.]

I talked earlier about that non-creedal creed, The Baptist Faith & Message. Here is the section on God the Father. Only 17 of the 35 references, less than half, actually use the noun “Father.” They combine ideas of God as Creator and Sovereign with the idea of the Father. That isn’t entirely wrong as we’ll discover later, but it doesn’t seem quite proper to me.

Let’s examine some of these Old Testament references ourselves. We will probably find that New Testament scholar, Joachim Jeremias, is correct: “Nowhere, however, in the Old Testament do we find God addressed as ‘Father.’” [Jeremias, Joachim, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), p. 63.] Prior to the Exilic period this is true, but there are exceptions in Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; and Psalm 89:26 (English numbering) when God proclaims that the Davidic king will call Him “Father, even as 2 Samuel 7:14 identifies the Davidic king as God’s firstborn (though, of course, the New Testament identifies Jesus as God’s “first-born,” equating Him with the expected Davidic Messiah).

Why so few Old Testament references to addressing God as “Father” prior to the Exile? A respected history of Israel’s religious experience explains it as: “For centuries there had been signs of a certain hesitation in official Israelite religion to call Yahweh father, probably partly because of the sexual connotations of the notion of father and probably also because this familiar family address hardly suited the historical experiences which Israel had had with its God.” [Albertz, Rainer, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period: Volume II: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 403-404.]

So, without addressing the Father, we need to find some other hint of relationship. So, in the following verses (in the New International Version), who is identified as being in a father-son relationship with God?

Exodus 4:22? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
Jeremiah 3:19-20? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and given expectation of calling,
 “Father,” though the offer is ignored
Jeremiah 31:9? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
Psalm 68:5 (E) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
Psalm 103:13 (E)? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ him
Hosea 11:1-4 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

As one of the classic Old Testament Theologies of the 20th century put it: “The images of real significance, when God’s attitude to Israel is spoken of, are the ancient ones of marriage, of the father-son relationship and the divine role of shepherd.” [Eichrodt, Walther, *The Old Testament Library: Theology of the Old Testament: Volume I* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 59.] Notice that all of these categories, including that of father, are descriptions of relationships. Even the Old Testament perspective of “father” points to God’s desire for relationship with His people. So, it seems very appropriate that our first affirmation of belief in the creed is to God as Father.

Of course, this idea of God as Father becomes ever more explicit in the New Testament when we look at the model of Jesus. New Testament sources give us “…unanimous witness that Jesus used this address in all his prayers. (The one exception is Mark 15.34 par. [paralleled by] Matthew 27.46, the cry from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?’, and here, Ps. 22.2 [1 in English numbering] already provided the form of address.” [Jeremias, p. 62.] Again, “Both within the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament, only Jesus speaks of God as “my Father,” and he is our Father only because we are connected to Jesus by his Spirit.” [Kapic, p. 144.]

Jesus uses the normal word for “father” (πατήρ) approximately 170 times in the New Testament [Schnelle, Udo, *Theology of the New Testament*, Boring, M. Eugene (trans.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009—original 2007), p. 83.]. Not only does He address God as “My Father” in prayer, but He asserts His Oneness with God in both bearing the witness to the Father as a divine emissary of the Father … whose life is to do His will, and speak His words, and finish His work, whose triumph is simply to go to the Father, and through whom men come to the Father.” [Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics: 1.1: Volume 2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2010—original 1932-1938), p. 92.] Of course, if you don’t trust Karl Barth on this point, just look at John 12:29; 14:9-10; 17:3; and 20:21-23.

Such revelation even serves to reveal the Trinity, as Hippolytus explained: “The Father decrees, the Word executes [the decree], and the Son is manifested [by the Spirit], through whom we come to believe in the Father. The dispensation of harmony leads straight back to one God, for God is one.” [quoted in Bird, p. 59. “The material point in the New Testament texts is that *God* is found in Jesus because in fact Jesus Himself cannot be found as any other than God. And God is found in *Jesus* because in fact He is not found anywhere else but in Jesus, yet He is in fact found in Him.” [Barth, p. 112.]

Back to Jesus revealing God in prayer! While Kapic is correct that only Jesus says, “MY Father” in addressing God in prayer, we certainly must be aware that the Model Prayer teaches us to say, “OUR Father.” Still, the main point at the conclusion of that quotation stays true in that God IS “OUR Father” only because of our relationship to the Lord Jesus expressed via the indwelling Holy Spirit.

“Jesus addressed the designation of God as ‘your Father’ *only to his disciples*, and never to outsiders. That indicates that Jesus did not see the Fatherhood of God as something to be taken for granted, a common possession of all men, but as a privilege enjoyed by his disciples…Only in the sphere of the *basileia* [kingdom] is God the Father.” [Jeremias, p. 180.]

Let us notice also that Jesus didn’t merely use “My Father” when He was praying. Jesus consistently portrays Himself as the emissary of the Father … whose life is to do His will, and speak His words, and finish His work, whose triumph is simply to go to the Father, and through whom men come to the Father.” [Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics: 1.1: Volume 2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2010—original 1932-1938), p. 92.] Of course, if you don’t trust Karl Barth on this point, just look at John 14:6 and 17:3.

Even more importantly may have been Jesus’ use of the more intimate word for “Father,” that we might translate as “Daddy. אבא was regarded “…as so characteristic that even in Greek texts was not translated but transliterated…” [Schnelle, p. 83.]. Although Schnelle disagrees because of the common usage of the term outside of Christianity, I find Joachim Jeremias’ explanation to be quite convincing: “The complete novelty and uniqueness of ἀββα as an address to God in the prayers of Jesus shows that it expresses the heart of Jesus’ relation to God. He spoke to God as a child to its father: confidently and securely, and yet at the same time reverently and obediently.” [Jeremias, p. 67.]

This may also reflect why, although He used the typical word for “father,” Jesus told His followers in Matthew 23:9 not to call any earthly human being, “Father.” [Jeremias, p. 68.] This way, the intimacy we are supposed to have with God is not wasted on humans other than our own fathers. It was the custom to use “Abba” to show respect to older generations [Jeremias, p. 68.].

But is it proper to refer to God as “Father,” at all? Isn’t it too patriarchal? Isn’t it too problematic in our society where we have bad fathers or no fathers? Isn’t it too sexual as some early church authorities believed? Doesn’t it tend to reduce God to something earthly?

Although some people consider him to be a “liberal,” I have a lot of respect for Paul Tillich who tried to explain theology in the terminology of modern philosophy. But even with Tillich, hear what he wrote on this issue: “Religious symbols are double-edged. They are directed toward the infinite which they symbolize and toward the finite through which they symbolize it. They force the infinite down to finitude and the finite up to infinity. They open the divine for the human and the human for the divine. For instance, if God is symbolized as ‘Father,’ he is brought down to the human relationship of father and child. But at the same time this human relationship is consecrated into a pattern of the divine-human relationship.” [Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology: Volume I* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 140.] In other words, we think about God differently and we think about our relationships, both to God and each other differently.

But maybe you’d feel more comfortable with evangelistic theologian, Michael Bird: “The fatherly imagery underscores the person within the Godhead whose identity is associated with the deity’s supreme power and divine paternal care. God as Father speaks to the transcendence, sovereignty, and love within the Godhead.” [Bird, p. 60.] As for the image being too patriarchal, he writes: “It is worth pointing out that, even with the prevalence of fatherly language for God, there is also a sizeable number of places where God is described in maternal imagery. In Isaiah, God is portrayed as a mother in birth for Israel (Isa 42:14; similarly Deut 32:18). Isaiah says that God is like a nursing mother who will not abandon her children in the way that other mothers have (Isa 49:14–17). God comforts Israel like a mother comforting a frightened child (Isa 66:13). Thus, in the biblical description, there is more to God than fatherhood, and we should trace out the maternal imagery for a fuller picture of God’s character.” [Bird, p. 63.]

My favorite theologian is Wolfhart Pannenberg. He makes no bones about Jesus’ use of “Father.”

1. **God shows His fatherly nurture by caring for His creatures
(Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:30)**
2. **God shows His fatherly provision by letting His children ask and granting good things (Matthew 7:11)**
3. **“Jesus brought the creative activity of God, especially in his providential care for his creatures (Matt. 6:26; 5:45), into the picture of God’s fatherly goodness.”**
4. **“We cannot eliminate God as the heavenly Father from the message of Jesus. The words ‘God’ and ‘Father” are not just time-bound concepts from which we can detach the true content of the message.”** [Pannenberg, Wolfhart, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1,* Geoffrey Bromiley (trans.) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991—original 1988), pp. 262-263.]

When we believe in Jesus, we are grafted into the Father-Son relationship within the triune Godhead so that Jesus’s Father becomes our Father. God’s fatherhood is part of the particularity of God’s self-disclosure. He reveals himself as Father: the Father to Israel, the Father of Jesus, and even the Father of believers. [Bird, p. 64.] In short, think of it as being the theological equivalent of children talking on the playground. One says, “What does your daddy do?” We can honestly say, “Everything!”