

Last week we began a 6-week series exploring the Apostle’s Creed, focusing on the opening line, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” The Creed then asserts: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...” As you can see, this portion of the Creed is much more detailed than the rest. More than half of the creed includes affirmations related to Jesus.

As we shift focus today from the first person of the Trinity, God the Father, to the second person of the Trinity, Jesus the Son, I’d point out that one reason I believe in God is that Jesus believed in God. In reading about Jesus’ life and teachings, I can arrive at the same conclusion many do, that he was a great moral teacher. (Even the noted atheist Richard Dawkins concedes that!) But as I plumb more deeply into the Gospels, and the letters of Paul, it’s clear that Jesus based all he said and did upon his trust in God’s existence.

Permit me to say the same thing a bit differently. Like Paul in Romans 1:20, I look at the universe and how modern science proves that our earth is exquisitely fine-tuned to support the existence and flourishing of life. All this leads me to believe that none of this is accidental; that there’s a Higher Power whose love and energy intended to bring forth creation. But another reason I believe in God is because I trust Jesus, and he believed in God. Jesus invites us to do the same: to believe in his teachings, and to believe and trust in God.

Another good reason I have to continue believing in the Triune God, is that many of the most intelligent, loving people I’ve met, believe in the Triune God. And I think that if we have some doubts about one or more tenets of Christianity, my encouragement is to live by the faith of others as you navigate your doubts and questions. (I hope that makes sense.)

For today, I plan to stick closely with the beginning of the second line of the Creed because in it we have 4 very robust assertions about who Jesus is, even before the 11 or 12 assertions that follow. So, we’ll walk through some of what is meant when we say that we believe in 1) Jesus 2) Christ, 3) God’s only Son, 4) our Lord. So, let’s get to it...

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First, Jesus. The name Jesus was very common in the first century. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which can be translated as “deliverer” or “savior”. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we are told that Yeshua is the name God wants given to the son of Joseph and Mary as this name is a sign of what the child will do. According to Matthew 1:21, the angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him, “you will call him Yeshua, because he will save (or deliver) people from their sins.”

Even so, none of the Creeds offers particular clarity about how Jesus does this: how he saves us from our sin. You may be familiar with the word “atonement”. That word is used to say that Jesus somehow -- in his life, in his death, in his resurrection -- somehow reconciles us to God; saving us from our sin and separation from God and each other. But the creeds -- none of them -- specify ‘how’.

As we recited, the Apostles Creed says Jesus was crucified, died, and buried, but mentions nothing of the atonement. The Nicene Creed states that Jesus was ‘crucified for us’ or ‘for our sakes’ but says nothing about HOW his death reconciles us to God. In the mid-1800’s some Christians began to insist that there is only one correct way to believe in how Jesus atones for our sin; that if we don’t affirm that, we’re excluded from salvation. (That makes me wonder about all the Christians preceding the mid-1800’s who affirmed the Creeds, but didn’t affirm this particular view of the atonement...) Down the road we’ll explore different theories of how Jesus atones for our sins, but for now it seems clear that the essential belief from the very beginning is that Jesus saves us from our sin, and that our beliefs or ideas about HOW Jesus does this, are less essential.

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Let’s move to “Christ” the Creed’s first title for Jesus. I think it’s a common mistake of childhood – I certainly made it – to think of ‘Christ’ as Jesus’ last name. But Christ is a Greek word which means “anointed one.” Christ has the same meaning as the Hebrew word “Messiah.” This term, “Christ” (or “Messiah”), could be used in ancient times by any king chosen by God to rule over God’s people. Saul, David, Solomon were all anointed by God to rule over God’s people. When Christians say Jesus is Christ, we are saying that Jesus is our King and that we are subject to his rule and teachings.¹

According to the gospels, Peter was the first to declare Jesus Messiah. In Matthew 16:15, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But just 5 verses later Jesus sternly orders his disciples not to tell anyone he’s the Messiah.

Why? I can think of a couple of possibilities. Perhaps Jesus wants others to come to this profession on their own as they interact with him and his message. But more likely, it was a common belief that the long-hoped for Messiah of Israel would be like the great King David; an anointed King and military leader who would vanquish the enemies of Israel much like King David. Since Jesus knows he’s not the conquering Messiah long hoped for, it seems likely that he wants time to

demonstrate what his God-anointed reign actually looks like. One of the reasons Jesus was killed is because he wasn't the type of Messiah the majority of people wanted him to be.

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The Creed's next affirmation about Jesus is that he is 'God's only Son'. Unlike the name 'Yeshua', and the titles 'Christ' and 'Lord', this third phrase leads to the doctrine of Jesus' divinity.

Throughout the NT, and in all of the Creeds -- including the Apostle's Creed -- we see a struggle to clarify how Jesus was at the same time, both human and divine. Unlike Matthew and Luke, which include stories of Jesus' miraculous conception and birth, the Gospel of John testifies to the incarnation differently, saying that Jesus (and I'm summarizing) was "the Word with God at the beginning" and "became flesh and lived among us."

In Col. 1:15-17, Paul quotes a hymn of praise that predates John's Gospel, so we know that very early on Christians sang that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He [existed before all things], and in him all things are held together."

So again, very early on, Christians were striving to clarify how closely Jesus was related to God, while still trying to distinguish between God and Jesus. One reason for this was an early doctrine -- deemed to be heretical -- that Jesus was not really human, but that he was God only appearing to be human. This unorthodox idea emerged because many people, particularly Greek converts, thought the idea that God would become flesh and blood, and suffer death on a cross, was beneath God.

In the book *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, the Rev. Adam Hamilton responds: "The idea of God's becoming flesh in Jesus, born in an ordinary way through a woman's birth canal [] is part of the story's power and beauty. It was not beneath God to get mixed up in our humanity—to be conceived in a womb and born in this messy and very human way is precisely where we see God's glory."²

I like how Methodist theologian William Willimon sums up the incarnation saying, "Wesleyans believe that in Jesus Christ, God gets personal, relational, available, and virtually unavoidable."³

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Finally, we have the title 'Lord'. There's a definite difference about the word "Lord", and the other 3 words

we've explored. Remember that Yeshua means that Mary's son will save people (plural) from their sins. The word Christ, for those who profess faith, conveys that Jesus -- and no other ruler -- is God's anointed King over all creation. The term 'God's only Son' conveys how closely Jesus is related to God. But when we call Jesus 'Lord', we are saying that all of this means something directly and personally relevant. We are saying that what God has done for the world in Jesus, has also been done for each of us personally. And if your or I call Jesus 'Lord', that means he reigns over your or my life here and now. It's clear that the earliest disciples didn't spiritualize Jesus' Lordship to a future and heavenly realm. They lived according to his teachings after his resurrection, even when it proved costly.

One of our main disciple tasks is to regularly assess which parts of our lives we're failing to submit to the rule and reign of Christ our King. When Jesus is truly Lord, our hearts, our thinking, our feelings, our actions, our imaginations are totally given over for his purposes.

In seminary, I read something I still use to assess how well I am living under the Lordship of Christ. These words come from Rudy Weibe, "Jesus says that in [his kingdom] there is a new way to live: you show wisdom, by trusting people; you handle leadership, by serving; you handle offenders, by forgiving; you handle money, by sharing; you handle enemies by loving; and you handle violence by suffering. [Indeed] you have a new attitude toward everything and everybody. Toward nature, toward the state in which you happen to live, toward woman, toward slaves, toward all and every single thing. [Because in Jesus' kingdom] you repent, not by feeling bad, but by thinking differently."⁴

This, at a minimum, is what we mean when we say: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord."

¹ Hamilton, Adam. *Creed. What Christians Believe and Why*. Nashville. Abingdon Press. 2016. 59

² *ibid*, p. 50

³ Willimon, William. *This We Believe; The Core of Wesleyan Faith and Practice*. Nashville. Abingdon Press. 2010. p. 8

⁴ Weibe, Rudy, *The Blue Mountains of China*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970. pp 215-216

