

THE  
APOSTLES'  
CREED

What do  
we REALLY  
believe?

**Adult Study Guide**

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 1

*I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.*

It is well to bear in mind that faith is deeper and wider than a spiritual experience: it is an acknowledgement of the claims of Jesus Christ and an obedience to his commands. It consists primarily in personal devotion to a living Savior, but it also entails a confidence in the apostolic testimony concerning who he is and what he has done. Our faith is directed not simply to the mystical presence of Christ or to the unconditional, but to Jesus crucified and risen, according to the scriptures. The act of believing, though supremely important, must never prevail over the content of the faith. Donald Bloesch, 1928- 2010

A Christian is happy in knowing there is a God, an intelligent Cause and Lord of all, and that he is not the produce of either blind chance or inexorable necessity. He is happy in the full assurance he has that this Creator and end of all things is a being of boundless wisdom, of infinite power to execute all the designs of his wisdom, and of no less infinite goodness to direct all his power to the advantage of his creatures. John Wesley 1703-1791

Pantheists usually believe that the universe almost *is* God, so that if it did not exist God would not exist either, and anything you find in the universe is a part of God. But, of course, if you think some things really bad and God really good, then you cannot talk like that. You must believe that God is separate from the world and that some of the things we see in it are contrary to God's will. Confronted with a cancer or a slum that Pantheist can say, "If you could see this from the divine point of view, you could see that this is also God." To which the Christian replies, "Don't talk damned nonsense." For Christianity is a fighting religion. It thinks that this world— time and space, heat and cold, and all the colors and tastes, and all the animals and vegetables are things that God made up in his head as a man makes up a story. But it also thinks that a great many things have gone wrong with the world God made and that God insists, and insists very loudly, on our putting it right again. C.S. Lewis 1898- 1963

The proposition that God created heaven and earth and man asserts that this whole sphere is from God, willed and established by Him as a reality which is distinct from His own. In this respect, too, it contains within itself a negative and a positive. The negative is that the world is not alone—much less so than God. God could be alone; the world cannot. The world would not exist at all if God did not exist, and if it were not from Him. It is because it does not exist at all of itself, but only because God willed and created it, that it has no power over its existence and form; that it does not belong to itself; and that it cannot control itself. And the positive is that God is before the world; that He is an absolutely distinct and individual being in relation to it; that unlike the world He belongs to Himself and controls Himself; that He is completely self-sufficient because established and determined by Himself. And God is before the world in the strictest sense that He is its absolute origin, its purpose, the power which rules it, its Lord. For He created it. Through Him it came into being and through Him it is.

Karl Barth 1886-1968

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How can our understanding of how the world was made take on these deep theological truths?

What does it mean to experience God in nature?

How would you explain God the maker of heaven and earth to a small child?

What is our role in relation to God's creation?

From *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Donald Bloesch, Harper-Collins, 1978.

From *A Compend of Wesley's Theology*, Abingdon Press, 1954.

From *Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis, Harper Collins Ltd.

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 2

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, **27** to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [b] **29** But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. **30** The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. **33** He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Luke 23:44-53

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land [l] until three in the afternoon, **45** while the sun's light failed, [m] and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. **46** Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. **47** When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." [n] **48** And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. **49** But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things **50** Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph who, though a member of the council,

**51** had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. **52** This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. **53** Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.

Luke 24:1-5

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. **2** They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, **3** but when they went in they did not find the body. **4** While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. **5** The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.

Readings from the NRSV

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It would be interesting to compare the different Gospel accounts of these events, at your leisure, in order to see some of the differences.

How do these specific parts of the story— mentioned in the Creed— influence your reading of the rest of the story of Jesus?

Do each of the phrases of the Creed regarding Jesus seem “equal” to you? Which are the most important?

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 3

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,*

[So] long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us... it is true that we obtain this by faith, yet since we see that all do not indiscriminately embrace the offer of Christ which is made by the gospel, the very nature of the case teaches us to ascend higher, and inquire into the secret efficacy of the Spirit, to which it is owing that we enjoy Christ and all his blessings.... It is not without cause that the testimony of the Spirit is twice mentioned, a testimony which is engraven on our hearts by way of a seal, and thus seals the cleansing and sacrifice of Christ.... The whole comes to this, that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.

—John Calvin, 1509-1564

For historical Christianity, the plainest meaning of the Holy Spirit's "office" is: God at work in the living present revealing to us the meaning of the Christian past, centered as it is in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In this representation, the Spirit gives meaning to that revelation in the life of the church today. The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring men up to date; to make them contemporary witnesses; to transform Christian history into personal faith. It is the Spirit who performs the *actus tradendi* [passing on of the tradition], and so makes Christ our contemporary. This was Jesus' promise of the Paraclete: 'When the Paraclete comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness to me (John 15:26) ..He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you.' And the stretching out of history's time-span, far beyond any expectation in the early church, has not reduced the power of the Spirit to make faith spring forth from the soil of Christian memory. The medium of the Holy Spirit's action is-history!

—Albert C. Outler, 1908-1989

John 16:4b-11

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. **5** But now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ **6** But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. **7** Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate[b] will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. **8** And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about[c] sin and righteousness and judgment: **9** about sin, because they do not believe in me; **10** about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, and you will see me no longer; **11** about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

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How do you experience the Holy Spirit in your life?

What things help you know that the Holy Spirit is at work?

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 4

*the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,*

The idea of mystery (from *mueo*, "to instruct in sacred things"), was never meant to suggest incomprehensibility or absurdity, but rather the teaching of spiritual meaning that was as yet not fully revealed for all to see, yet anticipatively revealed, at least in its basic direction, for those who have eyes to see. In the New Testament *mysterion* refers to the divine plan of salvation hidden in past ages, but brought to light in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:2). The mystery was not that it is wholly unrevealed, but that his holy will had now at long last become manifest, that his governance was already present in the community of faith, and that the banquet of the end time was in anticipation already being set with bread and wine as lively indications of God's own real presence.....

Through these visible re-enactments, God's grace is awakening and empowering our participation in the life of Christ. We are born in Christ in baptism, and through Holy Communion we are nurtured, sustained, and, it is hoped, eventually sanctified (made mature in holy living) in Christ....

The sacraments presuppose that God has met us in history and that this meeting calls us to regular recollection and re-enactment in order to experience God's real presence in our midst. The grace of God is offered in and through these sacraments in a way that we cannot grasp by our own moral efforts. ... grace is being offered and, by faith, communicated to the believer in baptism and Holy Communion by Christ's own ordinance. They are means of grace.

Water, bread, and wine express promises, not that we make to God but that God makes to us, to which we may respond in obedient faith. They are signs of God's mercy to us and of God's immediate presence in our midst. We are cleansed through water and fed through bread. We are brought into the community by baptism and sustained in the community by communion.

Thomas C. Oden, 1931-

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We think of the Church in several ways— the Body of Christ, a holy people, a “set apart” people, or as a community of followers. Do any of these fit you? Your Church?

What does it mean to be “holy?”

Most of us have a definition for “Communion” and for “Saints.” What do they have to do with one another?

How does this part of the Creed form the way you live day to day?

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 5

*the forgiveness of sins,*

Sin. There is perhaps no word in our language which is used more ambiguously, in spite of its apparent simplicity....

Sin to the understanding Christian means rebellion against God and disobedience to His holy will. Sin ought never to be defined moralistically, simply as deviation from accepted human standards... Yet it must persistently be made clear that the rejection of moralism means no repudiation of Christian morality. There is no true possibility of defining sin in relation to God by disregard of relations with one's fellow men, for God is intimately concerned with these same fellow men and obedience to Him requires of us Christian agape (self-giving love) toward them....

Sin, then, is a relationship to God focused in self-centeredness, which shows itself in unloving attitudes and acts toward our fellow men... It is when we seek our own wills instead of God's will and regulate our lives by such self-seeking that sin corrupts our nature. This we all do. Thus, all men are sinners. Paul's insight, verified constantly throughout the Bible and empirically evident, is a true one, "none is righteous, no, not one. (Rom. 3:9).

Sin is rebellion against God, disobedience to the will of God.... Sin, therefore, is "original" in the sense of a persistent human tendency, and the Fall of man happened not once but is a perpetual falling away from the life of loving obedience which God requires of us.

—Georgia Harkness, 1891-197

Sin is our act of turning away from participation in the divine Ground from which we come and to which we go. Sin is the tum-ing towards ourselves, and making ourselves the center of our world and of ourselves. Sin is the drive in everyone, even those who exercise the most self-restraint, to draw as much as possible of the world into oneself. But we can be fully aware of this only if we have found a certain level of life above ourselves. Whoever has found himself after he has lost himself knows how deep his loss of self

was. If we look at our estrangement from the point of reunion, we are no longer in danger of brooding over our estrangement. We can speak of Sin, because its power over us is broken.

... Sin uses the commandments in order to become alive.

Prohibition awakens sleeping desire. It arouses the power and consciousness of sin, but cannot break its power. Only if we accept with our whole being the message that it is broken, is it also broken in us.

—Paul Tillich, 1886-1965

Forgiveness is the divine answer to the question implied by our existence.

—Paul Tillich 1886-1965

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It is important that the Creed states a belief in forgiveness of sins, not in the sinfulness of human beings. Why do you think this may be so?

Is it possible to accept forgiveness from God and not forgive others?

Rarely does forgiveness mean that nothing has been done that was wrong or hateful. Usually needing forgiveness includes the opposite—admitting something awful has happened, and I need a way forward. How does this help or hurt your understanding of forgiveness?

Readings and Discussion Questions  
Week 6

the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Now we ask how can anyone imagine that our animal body is to be changed by the grace of the resurrection and become spiritual? ...It is clearly absurd to say that it will be involved in the passions of flesh and blood.. By the command of God the body which was earthly and animal will be replaced by a spiritual body, such as may be able to dwell in heaven; even on those who have been of lower worth, even of contemptible, almost negligible merit, the glory and worth of the body will be bestowed in proportion to the deserts of the life and soul of each. But even for those destined for eternal fire or for punishment there will be an incorruptible body through the change of the resurrection.  
—Origen, 185-254

By everlasting life is not only meant that we shall die no more, for in this sense the damned shall have everlasting life as well as the saints: they shall always have a being, though in intolerable torments, which is infinitely worse than none at all. But we are to understand by it full and perfect enjoyment of solid inexpressible joy and felicity. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God hath prepared for those that love him." The soul shall be perfectly renewed and sanctified, nor shall it be possible to sin any more. All its faculties shall be purified and exulted: the understanding shall be filled with the beatific vision of the adorable Trinity, shall be illuminated, enlarged and eternally employed and satisfied in the contemplation of the sublimest truths. Here we see as in a glass, have dark and imperfect perceptions of God, but there we shall behold him as he is, shall know as we are known. Not that we shall fully comprehend the divine nature as he doth ours—that is impossible, for he is infinite and incomprehensible and we, though in heaven, shall be finite still—but our apprehensions of his being and perfections shall be clear, just, true; we shall see him as he is, shall never be troubled with misapprehensions or false conceptions of him more.

—Susanna Wesley, 1670-1742

Eternal life was the destination of Christ's journey. It is the destination of our journey as well, since the Easter story happened for us. No backing out,

dear brothers and sisters! No return to a life where we once again would labour in the service of sin, of our evil defiance, only to earn and to receive death as the wages of sin! No, forward, into life eternal! Eternal life is man's life when God has spoken his 'yes' upon it, once for all, unconditionally and unreservedly, not to be changed any more. Eternal life is man's life lived with God, in his bright light, nourished and sustained by his own life. Eternal life is man's life committed to the service of God and thereby to the service of the neighbor, a life which certainly also serves him best who is allowed to live it. Eternal life is a strong and no longer weak life; joyous and no longer sad; true and no longer deceitful. Eternal life is man's indestructible life because it comes from God and is sustained by him. It is life ever-lasting, extending beyond any natural end which now can no longer be death.

—Karl Barth, 1886-1968

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."  
— John 20:19 (NRSV)

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How does faith influence the way we view death?

Do the Biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrected body help you think about your own death?

How does the Creed help us understand the human condition?