

Confessing the faith on Christmas Day in the Morning

Colleagues, A ThTh subscriber from the other side of the world ("other side," that is, from where I live in St. Louis, Missouri USA) sent me recently the text of a new creedal statement his Protestant denomination is working on. He asked for my comment. In the course of doing so I wound up confecting my own thoughts about "new" creeds.

Basically I'm content with the ones I've inherited—Apostolic, Nicene, and even the Athanasian with its warts and wrinkles. More specifically I'm happy with Luther's Small Catechism and its "What does this mean?" for the three articles of the Apostles' Creed. And in 46 yrs of teaching I've sought to get students happy too about his succinct explanations—in nickel words—of what the faith is all about.

Here's what I hear him saying—

In the first article: I'm God's creature. It's all gift. So is everything else. These gifts obligate. But I'm seriously in arrears in fulfilling these obligations. [Ergo, help needed.]

[And there is help.]

Second article: Core confession is: "Jesus Christ is my Lord." Lord means owner. But I'm entangled with alien owners—in, with and under all those unfulfilled obligations. The consequences are lethal. Christ's work is ownership-transfer, to bring us back to the original owner of the first article. His biographical data spell out what it took to make that happen. With this result—as the old catechism translation said—"so that I may be HIS OWN." The consequences of that transaction are good news indeed.

[So how does this help get to folks in later millennia?]

Third article: The Holy Spirit's job is to keep the ownership-transfer going. To get—and keep—sinners Christ-connected. Then follow the specs for how the Holy Spirit does this. Venue for this Christ-connecting is the community called church. The core action for what constitutes the "Christian" church is the offer of the forgiveness of sins. When trusted, that forgiveness generates the life that lasts.

Just for fun, I'll paste in ML's own text, so you can see for yourself. Text is the one I memorized in parochial school way back in the previous millennium.

LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM. Part II

The Creed as the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

The First Article: Creation

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

What does this mean?

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that he has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life; that He defends me against all danger, and guards and protects me from all evil; and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which it is my duty [Ed: poor translation here. The German says: "I am already in arrears in my obligation to . . ." I.e., I need help! Thank God for the 2nd article.] to thank and

praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

The Second Article: Redemption

“And 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, dead, and buried: he descended into hell, the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God, the Father almighty, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

The Third Article: Sanctification

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in true faith; even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church he daily and richly forgives sins to me and all believers, and will at the Last Day raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Back to the new creed proposed from the other side of the world. Those folks started with the second article about Christ. That was a tease. But, why not? Why not go for the jugular in the opening statement—necessitating Christ. They also had a concluding 4th paragraph. So I followed their lead when I conjured up what follows. I don't imagine that they will adopt my credo. Even though Luther's explanations are more succinct, I want to follow in his train. You decide.

A statement of faith:

1. Like St. Paul in Athens (Acts 17) we live today on a new Mars Hill in a "sea of faiths."

Gods, sacred and secular, abound.

We believe in Jesus. We call him "Christ," our rescuer.

Fully human as we are, yet unlike us, he was God-in-our-flesh being merciful to us.

That mercy brought him to the cross, his great exchange with sinners:

our sin going to his account (and death as the consequence) with his righteousness to our account (and life that lasts as the consequence).

His resurrection, so we claim, is God's own "OK" for his dealings with us in mercy, and our grounds for hope in every valley of the shadow of death we meet.

We trust him for this Good News, the very grounds for a whole new creation.

2. Because of Christ, we call God "Father."

God Father is creator—of us and all that exists.

To exist at all is a gift. To be a creature is to be a receiver.

As our creator God rightfully is also our evaluator, our critic [Gen. 1-3].

Though we are marvelously gifted as God's creatures, our response to the Giver is woefully deficient.

Apart from Christ the whole human race is in trouble with God the creator.

Yet in Christ we know God to be for us, as Christ was for us.

Because of Jesus, the one he called Father is "our Father."

Thus our primal prayer is addressed to Our Father for our lives and for the welfare of the whole creation.

3. We confess the Holy Spirit as the power of God-in-Christ now "loose" in God's creation.

"The Triune God" is our way of speaking of God as Gospel.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit is "the Good News about God."

The Holy Spirit in this Trinity "takes what is Christ's" and offers it to the world.

Agents for that Spirit's work are the ones who call Christ Lord, themselves the product of the Holy Spirit's offer.

As the community of Christ-connected people – sinners, yet saints – we live from Gospel and sacraments, drawing on the Holy Scriptures to keep our faith focused on Christ and our lives focused on the world.

4. We trust that we belong to God, children of that Father, his Son our brother, whose "own" we are, constantly on the receiving end of the Holying Spirit.

The "care and redemption of all that God has made" we understand to be our primal calling(s).

Our hope centers on Christ's promise that this calling is God's own plan for the world.

We believe that God offers this Gospel to the whole world,

also on today's Mars Hill where other gospels abound.
We do not claim that ours is the best.
Rather our claim is that it is Good News, an offer both
"good" and "new" that we too had never heard before.
Nor have we heard it elsewhere.
We seek to extend the offer to others. We stake our lives
on it.

Peace & Joy this Christmas Day!
Ed Schroeder