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The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; 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 again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From there he will come to judge the living and dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

My desire was to give a basic understanding of the doctrines of the Christian church, so I chose one of the most recognized of the various Creeds. Think of it this way, if you look at life as a cross-country journey, you would need a map. Now, there are all kinds of maps. You can use a large-scale relief map. This kind of map marks all the paths, bogs, crags in detail. However, if you were just choosing which route to take, then you would learn a whole lot more using a simple road map. A road map leaves all the small detailed geography and simply show you which roads to take. Both maps serve a purpose; you just have to choose what you need.

Going back to the analogy of our life being like a cross-county journey, the million-word-long Bible is the large scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-word Apostles' Creed (called that, not because the Apostles wrote it—but because it teaches apostolic doctrine) is the simple road map. It ignores most of the details but allows you to see at a glance the main points of Christian belief. The word Creed simply means belief; by some, it was know as the Belief, and when it first appeared around the second century, it was referred to as the Rule of Faith.

When a person comes into the Christian faith, their advisor naturally wants to help them start studying the Bible as soon as possible, and to help them grow in their personal trust in the living Christ. Well, as a means of serving both ends, it helps to take them through the Creed, as both a preliminary orientation to the Bible and a preliminary analysis of the convictions on which their faith in Christ must rest.

The Creed tells us about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so that after we have found about them, we can then experience them. The Prayer Book Catechism asks, "What do you learn from the Creed?"

"First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world.

"Secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind.

"Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God."

Boy, I'll tell you what, when you have that much, you are nor far from God's kingdom! Confucius said, "The essence of knowledge is, having it, to apply it." Well, I can't think of any area where this is truer, than in Christianity. This is where true knowledge (of the true God) is precisely knowledge about God—applied. What I will attempt to offer is knowledge about God, for application.

I believe in God:

That is not like, “I believe in Ghosts”—which means, “I think ghosts are real.” Nor is it like, “I believe in socialism”—which means, I think socialist principles are just and beneficial. No, “I believe in God” is much more than that. I can believe in ghosts without hunting for one, and in socialism without ever casting a vote. That belief is simply a matter of the intellect. However, the words, “I believe in God,” are like saying, “I am believing into God.” In other words, over and above believing certain truths about God, I am living in a relation of commitment to God in trust and union. I am proudly professing my conviction that God has invited me to this commitment, and declaring that I have accepted his invitation.

For those inclined, here are some thoughts and verses so you can study more:

In churches that say the Creed, do so in unison, but the opening words are, “I believe . . .”—not “we”; each person is supposed to speak for themselves. So, he proclaims his philosophy of life, and at the same time testifies to his happiness: he has come into the hands of the Christian God where he is glad to be, and when he says, “I believe,” it is an act of praise and thanksgiving on his part. It is in truth a great thing to be able to say the Creed.

Read:

Romans 4

Hebrews 11

Mark 5:25-34

The God I believe in

This topic isn’t necessarily part of the Creed, however, we just saw the first declaration, “I believe in God,” and it is important to know what it should mean when we stand in church and say, “I believe in God.” Are we at this point just allying ourselves with Jews, Moslems, Hindus and others against atheism, and declaring that there is some God out there—as distinct from none? Every body says, “I believe in God.” Big deal . . . I love what James says: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” However, when a Christian stands up and says, “I believe in God,” they are doing more than the others. We are professing faith in the God of the Creed itself, the Christian God, the Sovereign Creator whose “Christian name,” as Karl Barth put it, is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If this is not the God in whom we believe, we have no business saying the Creed at all.

Let me make myself be clear here. Today’s idea is that the great divide is between those who say, “I believe in God” in some sense, and those who cannot say it in any sense. Atheism is seen as an enemy, paganism is not, and it is assumed that the difference between one faith and another is secondary. Not so, rodeo—in the Bible the great divide is between those who believe in the Christian God and those who serve idols—“gods,” that is, whose images, whether metal or mental, do not square with the self-disclosure of the Creator. When many people recite, “I believe in God” they are actually saying “I do not believe in God—not this God, anyhow.”

God has revealed himself, establishing his identity, so to speak, by telling us his “name.” This “name” appears in four connections.

First, God gave his “proper name,” JEHOVAH (or Yah-weh, as modern scholars prefer), to Moses as the burning bush. The name means “I am who I am,” or “I will be what I will be.” He cannot be hindered from being what he is, and doing what he wills.

Second, God “proclaimed the name of the LORD” to Moses by delineating his moral character—“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity . . . but who will by no means clear the guilty . . .” This “name”—you could call it a revealed description—discloses both God’s nature and his role.

Third, the Son of God told his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Note that he said, “Name,” and not “Names.” The three persons together constitute the one God. This is the most dizzying and unfathomable truth of all.

In itself, the divine tri-unity is a mystery, a transcendent fact that surpasses our understanding. (The same is true of such realities as God’s eternity, infinity, omniscience, and providential control of our free action; indeed, everything there is to know about God, exceeds our comprehension.)

Fourth, Jesus was the only one to declare he was the only providing access to his Father. Jesus said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Some accuse Christians of being closed-minded, unyielding, the problem is that we did not make the rules. Jesus is the one who said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no comes to Father except by Me.” Why people resist a gift beyond me, but I did not offer the gift—God did. If you have a better way, talk to him about it.

For those inclined, here are some thoughts and verses so you can study more:

God revealed: John 1:1-8

The Father Almighty:

Clearly, this statement has an immediate view that I, and everything around me, depends on God as Creator for our existence, every moment. However, this Almighty Creator is also my Father. Some like to think of the universal fatherhood of God—implying that all men are and always will be in state of salvation, but that is not the Biblical view. Paul wrote about people to whom the word of the cross is folly as perishing.

The New Testament speaks of God’s fatherhood—not with reference to creation, but in two other ways. First in the inner-life of the Godhead. Within the Trinity is a family relationship of Father and Son. Jesus called the One he served my father and prayed to him as Abba—the Aramaic equivalent of a respectful Dad.

The second connection where it speaks of God as Father has to do with the believing sinner’s adoption into the life of God’s family. As Jesus rose from the dead, he said, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” As disciples, they belonged

to the family—in fact, the New Testament goes on to say that Jesus “is not ashamed to call us his brothers!” Whoa!

Beyond that, Christians see him as The Father Almighty—which means that he can and will do all that he intends. For his children, he intends that they share in his family riches; personality; life; and nature.

For those inclined, here are some thoughts and verses so you can study more:

On our adoption in Christ: Ephesians 1:3-14

Galatians 4:1-7

God the overruler: Genesis 50:15-26

Psalms 93

Acts 4:23-31

Maker of Heaven and Earth

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”; that is Bible-talk saying, “God created everything that is.” The first two chapters of Genesis do not tell us much about the method of creation—you know, they neither endorse nor rule out the idea of physical organisms evolving through epochs of thousands of years. What is clear, however, is that their main aim is to tell us not how the world was made, but who made it.

For those inclined, here are some thoughts and verses so you can study more:

God the Creator: Genesis 1, 2

Isaiah 45:9-25

And in Jesus Christ

“I believe in God the Father . . . and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” When we call God maker of heaven and earth, we part company with Hinduism and Eastern faiths; now, by calling Jesus Christ God’s only Son, it parts company with Judaism and Islam and stands all by itself. This claim for Jesus is both the touchstone of Christianity and the ingredient that makes it unique.

Now, this claim is the most important part of Christianity. As Karl Barth confidently declared, “Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way.” We would never know about the Trinity, or salvation, or resurrection and life everlasting apart from Jesus Christ. It was Jesus Christ, in his redemption of all God’s people, who revealed all these truths.

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae to “be careful that nobody spoils your faith through intellectualism or high-sounding nonsense. Such stuff is at best, founded on men’s ideas of the nature of the world, and disregards Christ! Yet it is in him that God gives a full and complete expression of himself.” Do you want to know and understand the Father? Then know and understand the Son.

Several years ago, I ran across this poem (or is it a hymn), anyway it provides insight into the Christian devotion:

Great Prophet of my God!
My tongue would bless thy name;
By thee the joyful news
Of our salvation came;
The joyful news of sins forgiven,
Of hell subdued, and peace with heaven
Jesus, my great High Priest,
Offered his blood and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside;
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the throne.
My dear Almighty Lord,
My conqueror and my King,
Thy scepter, and thy sword,
Thy reigning grace I sing.
Thine is the power; behold, I sit
In willing bonds before thy feet.
For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:
Jesus—God and man: Hebrews 1:1—3:6
His only Son, our Lord

Whenever a father introduces his son as my only son, you know he is the apple of his father's eye. Well, Jesus, as God's only son, enjoys his Father's deepest love. During his initial baptism, they heard a voice say, "This is my beloved son . . ." Beyond that, the phrase stands against other faiths that wish to deny his divinity. Jesus was not just a God-inspired good man; nor was he a super-angel, first and finest of all creatures, called "god" by courtesy because he is far above ordinary men, which is what the Jehovah's Witness say.

No, Jesus was, and remains, God's only Son, as truly and fully God as his Father is. Jesus said that God's desire is that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. Which is a statement that knocks Unitarianism flat.

The Nicene Creed says, "Begotten of his Father before all worlds . . . begotten, not made." The point of it is that although the Son lives his life in dependence on the Father, he is in himself divine and eternal, and is not a created being.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:
God's Incarnate Son: Colossians 1:13-23

Born of the Virgin Mary

The Bible says that the Son of God entered and left this world by acts of supernatural power. His exit was by resurrection-plus-ascension, and his entry by virgin birth: both fulfilling Old Testament anticipations.

The entry and exit miracles carry the same message. First, they confirm that Jesus he was more than man. His earthly life, though fully human, was also divine. He, the co-creator, was in the world—his own world—as a visitor; he came from God, and went to God. This is what the Scripture teaches, but do not make the mistake of believing, just because I wrote it down, that I understand it all. I simply believe it is true.

Looking at the early church, they looked at the virgin birth as proof, not that Jesus was truly divine as distinct from being merely human, but that he was truly human as distinct from merely looking human as ghosts and angels might do.

In addition, these two miracles demonstrate Jesus' freedom from sin. Virgin-born, he did not inherit the guilty twist called original sin: his manhood was untainted, and his acts, attitudes, motives, and desires were faultless. Being without sin, death could not hold him, once his sacrifice was complete.

You can find another interesting and important point in Genesis 3:20. "Adam called his wife's name Eve—or Life Spring—because she was the mother of all the living." The Hebrew word for Eve is Havvah, which means Life Spring, the Living One or the Life Giver. God was telling Adam that his wife would be the mother of the life-giving One, our Christ.

The fascinating point regarding the Incarnation is that it is not out of harmony with human desire or tradition. Every tribe and most religions believe in an incarnation of some form or another. Humanity has craved an Incarnation. Because we are created in God's image, with ability to share in God's life, our spirit hungers for union with Deity.

This is proved by man's drinking the blood of human sacrifices; by the naming of kings after the titles of his deities; and making his emperor or king an incarnation of Deity. The gods of the Greeks and Romans were supposed to have been divine and human, proving man's hunger for a union with Deity.

If you accept the premise that the first man was created, which, I admit, many argue, but if you are willing to accept that, the Incarnation is no more difficult to believe. God created Adam and it was an act of Divine Power. Then, natural processes generated the rest of the human race. Then, this Redeemer, who was to be born of a woman, was to be formed by a special act of Divine Power, just as Adam was. Since he is God Almighty, the Incarnation is a possibility.

After Adam's act of treason, his descendants needed a Redeemer. However, this Redeemer had to fulfill certain requirements:

1. He must be a man, because he must represent humanity
2. He must possess the capacity to understand and to sympathize with the temptations of man
3. He must also possess a standing of righteousness with God
4. He must not be a subject of Satan; he must be free from all Satanic authority

This Mediator must stand as Adam stood before the fall. The only way to complete each of these requirements is by the complete unity of God and man in one individual. The only way to accomplish this is through the virgin birth.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The virgin birth:

Matthew 1:1-25

Luke 1:26-56

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried

What would you think of a political party, where the members constantly repeated that their founder was put to death by the government, because he was a threat to law and order! Yet this is what Christians do, and the cross of Jesus is the focal point of our faith.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified.

Drop off the first part of that sentence. Was crucified. This was the standard Roman way of executing criminals. To say, Jesus was crucified is like saying he was hanged or went to the electric chair.

Under Pontius Pilate. History will remember Hitler as the man who gassed the Jews, and Pilate, a nonentity otherwise, remembered only as the man who killed Jesus. Under the Roman occupation, the Jewish authorities could not execute anyone, so when they had passed sentence on Jesus for confessing his identity as God's savior-king, the Christ (a confession they saw as blasphemous), they passed him on to the governor for action.

Then, Pilate, having symbolically washed his hands of the matter—the goofiest gesture of all time, I think—gave the green light for judicial murder, directing that Jesus, though guiltless, should die all the same to keep people happy. Pilate saw this as shrewd government; how cynical can you get?

Suffered.

This does not just refer to the everyday meaning of bearing pain, but also the sense of being the object of someone else's abuse. The Latin word is *passus*, which is where we get the word passion. Think of it this way: both God and men were agents of Jesus' passion: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" God's purpose at the cross was as real as was the guilt of the crucifiers.

The obvious question becomes, what was God's purpose? Very simply, it was his judgment on sin—for the sake of mercy on sinners. The miscarrying of human justice was the fulfillment of divine justice. On the cross, Jesus experienced all the pain: physical, spiritual and mental, that man could inflict—he also experienced all the divine wrath and rejection that our sins—yours and mine—deserved; he was there in my place, making atonement for me. All like sheep have gone astray . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Now I am going to throw out one of those \$10 Christian words for you: *Propitiation*. That there is the heart—better yet, the heart of the heart—of Christianity. It speaks of the quenching—extinguishing—eliminating—assuaging, whatever term you wish to use, of God's personal wrath against us by blotting out our sins from his sight. It is the act of totally placating and overcoming the distrust and animosity between God and us. Sometimes people say, "Well, I

gotta make peace with my maker . . .” I have great news for you! He has already made the peace! He has made you an offer—an offer you can choose to reject, but would be foolish to do so.

The Son of God . . . loved me, and gave himself for me; so May I never boast of anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The meaning of the cross:

Isaiah 53

Romans 3:19-26

Hebrews 10:1-25

He descended into hell

Christians believe that Jesus is alive and that those who know him as Savior, Lord and Friend find in this knowledge a way through all life’s problems, dying included. What do you think got Beth through her dark days? Where is Patrice’s strength and confidence? For Christ leads me through no darker rooms/than he went through before. Having tasted death himself, he can support us while we taste it, and carry us through the great change to share the life beyond death—that he has already passed. Death w/o Christ is the king of terrors, but death with Christ loses the sting, the power to hurt, which it otherwise would have.

John Preston, one of the early Puritans, knew this. It is reported that when he lay dying, someone asked him if he feared death, now it was so close. “No,” he whispered; “I shall change my place, but I shall not change my company.” As if to say, I shall leave my friends, but not my Friend, for he will never leave me.

This is victory—victory over death, and the fear it brings.

Descended into hell means that Jesus entered, not Gehenna, but Hades—that is, he really died, and that it was from a genuine death, not a simulated one, that he rose.

What makes Jesus’ entry into Hades important for those who have sworn allegiance to him, is simply the fact that now we can face death knowing that when it comes, we will not find ourselves alone. He has been there before us, and he will see us through.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The Christian’s attitude toward death:

Philippians 1:19-26

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

2 Timothy 4:6-18

The third day he rose again from the dead

Let’s pretend that Jesus, having died on the cross, had stayed dead. Suppose that, like Socrates, Confucius, or Mohammed, he was nothing more than a beautiful memory. Would it matter? We would still have his example and the pithy statements he made; all his teachings, wouldn’t they be enough?

Enough for what? Not for Christianity. Had Jesus not risen and defeated death, simply stayed in the grave, the bottom would drop out of our faith.

Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” Can we be sure it happened? The evidence is solid. The tomb was empty, and nobody could produce the body. For more than a month after, the disciples kept meeting Jesus alive, always unexpectedly, usually in groups from two to 500. Hallucinations do not happen this way!

Remember the old Christian Hymn, *He Lives!*? The chorus goes:

He lives, He lives,
Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and He talks with me
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives:
He lives within my heart.

The disciples, for their part, were sure that the risen Christ was neither an imaginary vision— nor a fraud—and tirelessly proclaimed his rising in face of ridicule, persecution, and even death—(which is an effective way of scotching the malicious rumor that they stole Jesus’ body.)

The corporate experience of the Christian church over twenty centuries chimes in with the belief that Jesus rose, because the risen Lord truly walks with me, talks with me, along life’s narrow way, and communion with him belongs to the basic Christian awareness of reality. I once explained to two co-workers who would constantly debate the reality of Christianity—I admitted that some of their arguments were compelling, but regardless, I could never deny what I have seen and experienced in my own life. Jesus; our Father, the wonder of fellowship with the rest of the family, all are as real for me as Patrice, Jon; Chris; Steph and Robert. I could not deny the reality and claims of Jesus any more than I could deny the existence of my wonderful physical family—(although when they were teenagers I may have been tempted).

What is the significance of Jesus’ rising? It marked Jesus out as Son of God; it demonstrated victory over death; it guaranteed the believer’s forgiveness and justification and his own future, too; and it brings him into the reality of resurrection life now. Yippee! You could speak of Jesus’ rising as the most hopeful—hope-filled—event that has ever happened—and you would be right!

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The resurrection of Jesus:

John 20:1-18

1 Corinthians 15:1-28

He Ascended into Heaven

Heaven in the Bible means three things:

First, the end-less, self-sustaining life of God. In this sense, God always lived in heaven, even when there was no earth.

Second, it speaks of the state of angels or men as they share the life of God, whether as a foretaste now, or in all of its fullness hereafter. Now, in this sense, the Christian's reward, treasure, and inheritance are all in heaven and heaven is shorthand for the Christian's final hope.

Third, the sky, which, being above us and more like infinity than anything else we know, is an emblem in space and time of God's eternal life, just as the rainbow is an emblem of his everlasting covenant.

In the Ascension, forty days after his rising, Jesus entered heaven in the sense of two listed above, in a new and momentous way: from that time on, he sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, ruling all things in his Father's name and with his Father's almightiness for the long-term good of his people.

What happened at the Ascension, then, was not that Jesus became a spaceman, but that his disciples saw a sign, just as at the Transfiguration. As C. S. Lewis puts it, "they saw first a short vertical movement and then a vague luminosity (which is what 'cloud' presumably means . . .) and then nothing." In other words, Jesus' final withdrawal from human sight, to rule until he returns to judgment, was presented to the disciples' outward eyes as a going up into heaven in sense three.

Now this is not so hard to understand. His withdrawal had to happen somehow and going up, down, or sideways, failing to appear or suddenly vanishing were the only possible ways. Which one would signify most clearly that Jesus would be reigning in glory? That answers itself.

The primary, if not sole message of the Ascension is: "Jesus the Savior reigns!"

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The significance of the Ascension:

Acts 1:1-11

Ephesians 1:15—2:10

He Shall Come

The Creed simply witnesses to the past, present, and future of Jesus Christ: his birth, death, rising, and ascension in the past; his reign now; and his coming at a future date to judge. With his coming, Scripture tells us, we receive our bodily resurrection and the full everlasting life. A new cosmic order will start then, also. This is indeed something that should excite followers of Jesus. We have a hope that outshines all the despair and fear of terrorists, economic struggles, wars—and rumors of wars, I could go on, but we have the hope of which Bunyan's Mr. Stand-fast said, "the thoughts of what I am going to . . . lie as a glowing Coal at my Heart." Yippee! There is a great day coming!

In a sense, Christ comes for every Christian as death, but we also look to the day when he will come publicly to wind up history and judge all men. Christians will be judged as Christians, who are already accepted, whom a blood-bought free reward awaits, will be judged according to the faithfulness of their service. Rebels will be judge as rebels, and will be rejected by the Master whom they rejected first. The judgments of Jesus, the righteous judge, will not raise any moral problems.

We do not know when he will come (so we must always be ready), nor how he will come—however, we know that when he appears, we shall be just like him, for we shall see him as he is.—and that is knowledge enough!

So Jesus told his disciples, “Be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The Christian’s attitude toward Christ’s return:
Luke 12:35-48
1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11
2 Peter 3

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

It is interesting to see how the Creed went from the creating work of the Father; to the rescue work of the Son; then to the re-creating work of the Spirit, where men are recreated—as one translation puts it, a new species of being that never existed before—in and through Christ.

One of the keys to understanding the New Testament view of the Spirit’s work is to see that his purpose is identical with the Father’s—namely, to see glory and praise come to the Son.

The Spirit is a witness and teacher because the first thing he does is convince us that the Jesus of the Gospel, the New Testament Christ, really exists, and is what he is for men, and for our salvation. Second, he assures us that as believers we are God’s children and heirs with Christ. Thirdly, he moves us to give testimony to the Christ he led us to know.

What the Spirit’s witnessing effects is not some private revelation of something undisclosed, but rather a personal experience of what was there all along in the Scriptures, but went unheeded. In Ephesians 1:18, Paul was describing the Spirit’s work of witness when he spoke of having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.

The Spirit gives to each Christian one or more gifts—capacities—to express Christ in serving God and man, so that every-member ministry in the church, which is Christ’s body—his hands and feet within the earth—may become a reality. Another way to look at this is to say that this manifold ministry is itself Christ’s own ministry continuing from heaven, through us as his hands, feet, and mouth.

So, what are the signs that Christ’s self-effacing Spirit is at work? Well, the only sure signs that I can think of are that the Christ of the Bible is acknowledged, trusted, loved for his grace and served for his glory, and that believers actually turn from sin to the life of holiness. That is Christ’s image in his people.

When I say, as a Christian, “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” my meaning should be, first, that I believe personal fellowship, across time and space, with the living Christ of the New Testament is a reality, which through the Spirit I have found. In addition, that I am open to be led by the Spirit, who now indwells me, into Christian knowledge, obedience, and service and I expect to be led each day. Lastly, that I bless him as the author of my assurance that I am a son and heir of God.

Without doubt, it is a wonderful thing to believe in the Holy Spirit!

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The Spirit’s ministry:

John 7:37-39; 14:15-26; 16:7-15
Romans 8:1-17

The Holy Catholic Church

I have to spend more time on this one. You see, it makes perfect sense that the Creed confesses faith in the Holy Spirit before proceeding to the church. It then mentions the church before mentioning personal salvation (forgiveness, resurrection, everlasting life). And, although the Father and Son have loved the church and the Son has redeemed it, it is the Holy Spirit who actually creates it by inducing faith; and it is in the church, through its ministry and fellowship, that personal salvation ordinarily comes to be enjoyed.

Unfortunately, this is the point at which the Roman Catholic Church and Protestants depart. They both confess the Creed, yet they are divided. Why? Because of divergent understandings of the phrase, “I believe in the holy catholic (or universal) church”—“one holy catholic and apostolic church,” as the Nicene Creed has it.

Official Roman Catholic teaching presents the church of Christ as the one organized body of baptized persons who are in communion with the Pope and acknowledge the teaching and ruling authority of the Episcopal hierarchy. It is holy because it produces saintly men and is kept from radical sin; catholic because in its worldwide spread it holds the full faith in trust for all men; and apostolic because its ministerial orders stem from the apostles, and its faith (including such non-biblical items as the assumption of Mary and her immaculate conception, the Mass-sacrifice, and papal infallibility) is a sound growth from apostolic roots. Non-Roman bodies, however church-like, are not strictly part of the church at all.

Protestants challenge this from the Bible. In Scripture, (they say) the church is the one worldwide fellowship of believing people whose Head is Christ. It is holy because it is consecrated to God (though it is capable nonetheless of grievous sin); it is catholic because it embraces all Christians everywhere; and it is apostolic because it seeks to maintain the apostles’ doctrine unmixed. Pope, hierarchy, and extra-biblical doctrines are not merely nonessential but actually deforming. If Rome is a church (which some Reformers doubted) she is so despite the extras, not because of them. In particular, infallibility belongs to God speaking in the Bible, not to the church or to any of its officers, and any teaching given in or by the church must be open to correction by what Anglican Article XX calls “God’s word written.”

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The church’s nature:
1 Peter 2

The Communion of saints

Some Protestants have taken this clause of the Creed as the Creed’s clarification of what the church is; namely, Christians in fellowship with each other—just that, without regard for any particular hierarchical structure. However, it is usual to treat this phrase as affirming the real union in Christ of the church “militant here in earth” with the church triumphant, as you see in the 12th chapter of Hebrews. It could also be that the clause was originally meant to signify communion in holy things (word, sacrament, worship, prayers), and to make the true but distinct

point that in the church there is a real sharing in the life of God. The spiritual view of the church as being a fellowship before it is an institution can, however, be confirmed from Scripture.

That the New Testament presents the Protestant view is hardly open to dispute—the dispute is whether the New Testament is final! The church the supernatural society of God’s redeemed and baptized people, looking back to Christ’s first coming with gratitude and on to his second coming with hope. Your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory—this is the church’s present state and future prospect. It is to this hope that both sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper point. Baptism is a prefiguring of the final resurrection; the Lord’s Supper is an anticipation of the marriage supper of the Lamb.

For the present, however, all churches (like those in Corinth, Colossae, Galatia, and Thessalonica [Ann Arbor, Atlanta, Miami etc.) are prone to err in both faith and morals, and need constant correction and re-formation at all levels (intellectual, devotional, structural, liturgical) by the Spirit through God’s Word.

For instance, the evangelical theology of revival, that was first spelled out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the present day “evangelical-charismatic renewal,” should remind us that churches must always be open to the immediacy of the Spirit’s Lordship, and that disorderly vigor in a congregation is infinitely preferable to a correct and tidy deadness. (Which is something Roman Catholic and Protestant disputers, in their concentration on doctrinal truth, tend to miss).

The decisive test of the church’s state is what happens in the local congregation. Each congregation is a visible outcrop of the one church universal, called to serve God and men in humility and, perhaps, humiliation while living in prospect of glory. Spirit-filled for worship and witness, active in love and care for insiders and outsiders alike, self-supporting and self-propagating, each congregation is to be a spearhead of divine counterattack for the recapture of a rebellious world.

The local church I attend developed a “vision statement” that says, “Our vision: To humbly bear the transforming presence of Jesus into the heart of Ann Arbor through Jesus brand spirituality, community and works of compassion; to steadily reproduce reproducing churches in southeastern Michigan and beyond.” A great ideal for any fellowship—just as long it goes beyond words and is put into action.

Here is a consideration: How is your congregation getting on? _____

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The church’s destiny:
Ephesians 2:11—4:16

Forgiveness of sins

What are sins? Well, according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, sin is “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” This closely echoes I John 3:4, where John wrote: sin is lawlessness. However, the reality goes beyond that. It is lawlessness in relation to God as the giver of law; it is rebellion in relation to God as rightful ruler; it is missing the mark in relation to God as our designer; it is guilt in relation to God as judge; and it is uncleanness in relation to God as the Holy One.

Sin is a perversity effecting and influencing each one of us at every point in our lives. Apart from Jesus Christ, no human being has ever been free of its infection. You will see the sin-factor influence your desires as well as your actions and motives. In my attempt to be more ecumenical, I reach for The Anglican Prayer Book, which says, “We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own heart . . . We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and (spiritually) there is no health in us.”

In the sight of God, sin is everybody’s problem, because he is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wrong. For us, life is a moral minefield; the harder we try to avoid sin the more we find—often too late—that we stepped right in it. We have blown to pieces the instruction to love God and to care for our neighbors. Where does that leave us? “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of man”

Karl Barth rightly stated, “It is always the case that when the Christian looks back, he is looking at the forgiveness of sins.” Well, let’s think about that. Forgiveness is pardon in a personal setting. It is taking-back into fellowship those who have offended you—hurt you. It is the act of excusing a mistake or offense. It is compassionate (showing unmerited kindness to the wrongdoer) it is creative (renewing the spoiled or soiled relationship)—it is also costly. When you choose to forgive someone, you are liberating them from a debt, of sorts, and you have to “give up” the right to collect on it. You must pay the cost of losing your pride and anger.

In this sense, God’s forgiveness is the supreme instance of this; it is God, through love restoring fellowship at the cost of the cross. If our sins were unforgivable, where would we be? Well, the least of which would be a bad conscience, which is the most universal experience—but it can also be the most wretched. Nothing can relieve it: no outward changes, no apologies, no acts of “making amends.” You carry it with you continuously. The more conscientious you are, the more aware you are of having failed others, and God, too. It can haunt you daily. Without forgiveness, you will have no peace. A bad conscience delivering at full strength, tearing you to pieces in the name of God, is hell indeed, both here and hereafter.

When you read the story of Job, you find that he was a man that was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil (which is more than we can say about most people). As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that he was called a perfect or blameless man, simply in the sense of being whole-hearted and sincere in his loyalty to God.

He was not of a double heart. In other words, he was not trying to serve two masters, God and himself. This whole-hearted loyalty to God made him upright in his life before men. He feared God and consequently shunned evil.

I John 5:20 says, “. . . He has given us ‘understanding’ so that we may know him who is true.” The understanding John refers to is the same as the Old Testament’s “fear of the Lord.” In other words, this is referring to an intuitive knowledge of God’s will—God’s heart—springing out of a close fellowship with God Himself. This is the natural outgrowth of an intimate relationship, a sharing of heart-with-heart. Job had this fear of the Lord to a marked degree and consequently, he abstained from anything evil. The one was an obvious result of the other.

The more intimate our relationship with the Father grows, and the more sensitive we become to His will and mind, the more we see the sinfulness of sin; the more sensitive we become to grieving the Lord. This is a goal and to be desired, just in case you were confused.

In the Song of Solomon, as the maiden is drawn into the King’s chambers, she cries out, “Do not stare at me because I am dark.” She was referring to the sinfulness that is glaringly exposed by the Holiness and bright, blinding light of the King. Isaiah cried, “Woe to me! I am

ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” John the Beloved “fell at his feet as though dead” when he saw the resurrected Lord.

The more intimate your relationship becomes, the more you develop a godly awe of Him and dread to grieve Him. Even the minutest sin will grieve your own heart; it will cause you to cry out for forgiveness and righteousness.

Marin Luther had suffered in agony over his realization of sin. He, like Isaiah and Jeremiah before him, agonized over his sin. Another man, also distressed about sin wrote to Luther. Luther replied, “Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say— Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not that I might become what I was not.” Paul wrote, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

We link up with Jesus, the living Lord, by faith, and the great exchange is fulfilled! Through Jesus’ atoning death, God accepts you as righteous, and cancels your sins. This is justification, forgiveness, and peace.

So what is our response supposed to be? Are we to sin to our hearts content and see how far we can exploit the grace of God? What a ghastly thought! Or as Clarence Jordan says in his Cotton Patch Version, “Hell, no! How can we who have died in sin still live in it?”

Paul in Romans and Galatians, and the Reformers after him, spoke of justification rather than forgiveness. This is because justification is forgiveness plus; it signifies not only a washing out of the past, but also acceptance and the gift of a righteous man’s status of the future.

Not only that, but justification is final. It is a decision on which God will never go back and say, “Well, on second thought . . .” Justification—public acquittal and reinstatement before God’s judgment-seat—is actually a much richer concept.

In the past, Christians did not grasp the decisiveness of present justification, nor did they see that Christ’s righteousness (“my Savior’s obedience and blood”) is the complete story. Nor did they realize that our part is to stop trying to earn it, and simply take it as God’s gift. Instead, they insisted that sacraments, “good works,” and purgatorial pains hereafter were all necessary means of final acceptance.

It took centuries before it happened, but finally the Holy Spirit broke through the heart of men like Martin Luther and other Reformers, that Paul was saying full and final acceptance was through a decisive act of forgiveness here and now, and you find this only by faith in the believer.

I would like to ask a personal question, is God’s gift of forgiveness by faith yours yet? It is easy to miss, you know. The Jews missed it. Paul said their tragedy was that their zeal for God led them to try to establish their own righteousness (i.e., earn his acceptance), and “they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (i.e., to his way of forgiving and justifying, by faith in Christ only): see Romans 10:2. The pathetic truth is that we sinners are self-righteous to the core, and are constantly justifying ourselves, and we hate admitting that there is anything seriously wrong with us, anything that God or man might seriously hold against us; and we have to do violence to our own perverted instincts at the point before faith is possible for us. God save us all from repeating the tragedy of the Jews in our lives.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

Justification through Christ by faith apart from works:

Romans 5; 10:1-13

Galatians 2:15—3:29

Philippians 3:4-16

Resurrection of the Body

Scripture sees death—life’s one certainty—not as a friend but as a destroyer. When my body and my spirit separate, it is a violent and unnatural separation. I will be nothing more than a shadow of what I once was. My body is part of me, it is the apparatus of my self-expression; without it, all my power to make things, do things, and relate to others is gone.

Consider someone with full use of their faculties, and compare them with a paralytic; now compare the paralytic with someone totally disembodied, and you will see what I mean. Paralytics can do some things however, disembodied persons, do even less. Death, while not ending our existence, nullifies and in a real sense, destroys it.

Death is the fundamental human problem. If death is final, then nothing is worthwhile (except complete self-indulgence). “If the dead are not raised,” Paul wrote, “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” No philosophy or religion that cannot come to terms with death is any real use to us.

This is where Christianity stands out. Among all the world’s faiths and “isms,” Christianity is the only one that views death as conquered. Christian faith is hope resting on fact—namely, the fact that Jesus rose bodily from the grave and now lives eternally in heaven. The hope is that when Jesus returns he will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body. This hope embraces all who have died in Christ as well as Christians alive at his appearing: “for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [Jesus’] voice and come forth, those who have done well, to the resurrection of life.” The raising of the body means the restoring of the person—not just part of me, but all of me—to active, creative, undying life, for God and with God.

This raising completes our redemption—not of our old bodies somehow patched up (thank you, Father for that), but of new bodies fit for new men. Through regeneration and sanctification, God has already renewed us inwardly; but now we receive bodies to match! The new body is linked with old, yet different from it, just as plants are linked with the seeds from which they grew, yet different from it.

My present body—“brother ass,” as Francis of Assisi would have me call it—is like a student’s old jalopy; care for it as I will, it goes precariously and never very well, and often lets me and my Master down (very frustrating!). However, my new body will feel and behave like a “Beemer,” and then my service will no longer be spoiled.

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

The resurrection hope:

Mark 12:18-27

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Philippians 3:4-16

The life Everlasting

Some think of an endless future life and are horrified. They think it would be so boring! I am guessing that they have found this life boring, and cannot imagine how human existence could be made permanently interesting worthwhile.

However, not everyone shares that view. Some are anxious to survive death. Hence, their interest and fascination with spiritualist phenomena, which is supposed to give them proof of survival. However, I caution you, there are three facts you need to be aware of. First, “messages” from the departed are distressingly trivial and self-absorbed. Second, “messages” do not come from those who in this life walked close to God. Third, mediums and their “controls” are embarrassed by the name of Jesus. The facts should give warning that spiritualist phenomena, whatever their true explanation, are a blind alley for investigating “the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

When Christians speak of “the life everlasting,” it does not refer merely to an endless existence. Shoot demons have that. Rather it refers to the final joy that Jesus entered, and that he promised and prayed that his followers would one day share. “Where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory.”

Being with Jesus is the essence of heaven; it is what the life everlasting is all about. “I have formerly lived by hearsay and faith,” said Bunyan’s Mr. Stand-fast, “but now I go where I shall live by sight, and shall be with him, in whose company I delight myself.” What are we going to in heaven? Not lounge around!—but worship, work, think, and communicate, enjoying activity, beauty, people, and God. First and foremost, however, we will see and love Jesus, our Savior, Master, and Friend.

Someone added an extra verse to John Newton’s Amazing Grace. This one verse spells out in the most vivid way, what everlasting life would be:

When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.

I have been writing with enthusiasm because this everlasting life is something I am geeked about. It is not because I do not love my life, here—just the opposite! My life is full of joy, from four sources—knowing God, my family, the good and pleasant things that God and men under God have created, and doing things that are worthwhile for God or others or for me as God’s man. However, I honestly admit my reach far exceeds my grasp. My relationships with God and men are never as rich and full as I want them to be, and I am always finding more that I thought was there in great music, great books, great lives, and the great kaleidoscope of the natural order. Jelly-roll Morton used to sing, “The more I have, the more I want, it seems”—and there are 1,001 things about which I find myself saying just that.

I have only walked with the Lord since 1979, and the more time I spend on this journey, I find that I appreciate God, and people, and good and lovely and noble things, more and more intensely. So it is pure delight to think that this enjoyment will continue and increase in some form (what form, God knows, and I am content to wait and see), literally forever. Christians inherit in fact, the destiny that fairy tales envisaged in fancy: we (yes, you and I, the silly saved sinners) live, and live happily, and by endless mercy will live happily ever after.

There is no way we can visualize heaven's life, and wise men will not even try. Instead, they will dwell on the doctrine of heaven, which is that there the redeemed find all their heart's desire: joy with their Lord, joy with his people, and joy in the ending of all frustration and distress and the supply of all wants. What was said to the child—"If you want sweets and hamster in heaven, they'll be there"—was not an evasion, but a witness to the truth that in heaven no felt needs or longings go unsatisfied. What our wants will actually be, however, we hardly know, except that first and foremost we will want to be "always . . . with the Lord."

For those inclined, here are some verses so you can study more:

Our destination:

Revelation 21:1—22:5