

Worship 101: The Creeds

In our worship on Sunday mornings, after the sermon, the congregation confesses what are known as the creeds. The word creed comes from the Latin “credo” meaning “I believe.” In the Lutheran church we use what are known as the three ecumenical creeds, the Apostles’, the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds. The creeds summarize what we are to believe as Christians in order to receive eternal life. Traditionally, the creeds were confessed right after the sermon so that the congregation could compare what they had just heard in the sermon with the orthodox Christian faith as set forth in the creeds. From earliest times the creeds have also been called the church’s symbols.

The final form of the Apostles’ Creed takes place in roughly the year 800 A.D. (in the year of our Lord). It started out centuries before as a simple confession of the Triune God with the church adding to it over the years. It is Trinitarian meaning that it follows the pattern of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The different sections of the creeds are known as its “articles.” And so, the first article has to do with the church’s belief in God the Father. Although all three members of the Triune God were involved in creation we usually emphasize the role of the Father in creating the heavens and the earth. The second article deals with the second person of the Trinity, the Son. In this article we confess what we are to believe as Christians concerning the person and work of Christ for our salvation. The third article has to do with what we are to believe about God, the Holy Spirit. With the third article we confess the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith in Christ which makes them a part of the holy Christian Church also known as the communion of saints. In this article we also affirm our belief in the forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.

The Nicene Creed gets its name from the city of Nicaea in which this creed was put together by the church. It was written in 325 A.D. to refute at that time what was known as the “Arian heresy”. Arius was a presbyter who came up with a teaching similar to what modern day Jehovah’s Witnesses believe about Christ. Rather than Christ being God, of the same essence as the Father, Arius taught that Jesus the Son was the highest creation of God and thus essentially different from the Father. This is not at all what the Scriptures teach about Christ so the church clarified what it taught and confessed about the Son. The truth is the Son is of the same essence of the Father or as the creed states, the Son is “of one substance with the Father.” We see the equality of the Son with the Father where in the Nicene Creed the church declares of Christ that He is: “God of God, Light of Light, very God, of very God, begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” The final form of the Nicene Creed that we use today took place at the Council of Constantinople in the year 381 A.D. Although this creed too has three articles dealing with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit its emphasis is upon Christ as God come to earth in human flesh.

The third creed that we Lutherans use is called the Athanasian Creed. We don’t know who wrote it. It appears to have been in use by Christian churches around the year 450 A.D. It is named after a fourth century bishop or pastor named Athanasius (297-373) who was an ardent defender of the orthodox faith in opposition to the heretic Arius in the Arian controversy. The Athanasian Creed sets forth the church’s teaching concerning the nature of the Triune God. It refers to this as the catholic faith which means this is what the true church of all times and places has believed and confessed. We only use it once a year, on Trinity Sunday because it is so lengthy.

As you can see from the dates in which these creeds were written, they were being used in one form or another before there was what we might call a “Roman Catholic church” or a “Lutheran Church.” Our use of these creeds therefore shows that what we believe as Lutherans connects us to the “church catholic,” that is the Christian church from its very beginnings. What we confess and believe is what the church has always confessed and believed. In other words, the Lutheran church is not something new but a continuation of the Christian church down through the centuries.

We confess these creeds on Sunday morning to publicly acknowledge who we are as Lutherans: Those who believe in the Triune God as the only God there is and the second person of the Trinity, Christ Jesus as the only Savior from sin, death and eternal damnation.

In Christ,
Pastor Bloom