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I believe.

We're all familiar with the Apostles' Creed. Like the Lord's Prayer, it was not invented by modern Christians. It comes directly from the Bible. But unlike the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of Matthew, we do not find it in a continuous passage; rather, we must piece our Apostles Creed together from multiple passages. Before we examine the Apostles Creed in detail, we look at Creeds in general. Yes, there are more than one. We'll consider two that are quite common.

The word "Creed" comes to us from the roots of the Catholic Church: "creed" derives from the Latin word "*credo*", which means "I believe". That's why we begin our Creed with "I believe". In the beginning of the Church, there were no New Testaments, no hymnals, no Christian prayer books. The early evangelists, such as the Apostles, would therefore summarize the basics of the faith in tight sermons. Consider this passage from the Book of the Acts, where Peter is preaching in Jerusalem. He delivers a good chunk of our Apostles Creed:

²⁹ "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection

*of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.
32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 33 Being therefore
exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise
of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.
34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,*

*“ ‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
35 until I make your enemies your footstool.” ’*

*36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both
Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

There are certain mysterious elements about the Christian faith that we typically see in creeds: There is only one God; Christ was a man and God; Christ died and then rose from the dead; Christ will come again. Creeds evolved over time. The Council of Nicaea, in the year 325 A.D., in what is now Turkey, was formed by the Roman Emperor Constantine. There was another council in Constantinople, now the Muslim city of Istanbul, in 380. Between these two, the Nicene Creed emerged. The Creed that we say, the Apostles Creed, rather than emerging from the Eastern Catholic Church, emerged from the Roman Catholic Church. The Apostles Creed dates to about 400 A.D. The Apostles Creed is terser.

The Nicene Creed was named after the city where it was developed; it is now the Turkish city of Iznik. It emerged as an attempt to deal with a conflict within the Christian world. There was a clergyman named Arius, from Alexandria, in Egypt, who argued that Jesus was not as fully divine as God the Father. He believed that

Jesus was a human, a holy one indeed, but not truly God. The question was phrased this way: was the “son” of God a created or born person, or was he like God, someone who had always existed because he was fully God? We don’t realize this today, but in the early centuries of the Christian Church, the relative divinity of Jesus was a point of great debate. Constantine called this council to resolve this issue once and for all. He had a secondary motive: he wanted to unify the eastern Christian Church as a way of solidifying his own hold on power. He was trying to prevent a huge schism from happening in the Christian Church, which would have torn his empire in two. He called the council to form a single, unified view of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 318 Bishops attended the conference. Many of them traveled great distances to get there. The primary opponent of Arius was Athanasius, also of Alexandria, who believed that Jesus and God were equal in their eternal nature as the one true, fully divine God. The Bishops at the Nicaea Council created the Nicene Creed as a way of ending the controversy. Although they did manage to hold the church together, the controversy was far from over. The council ended by supporting Athanasius, not Arius, but later in his reign, Constantine became a believer in Arianism. His son and successor, Constantius, was very much a believer in Arianism, the belief that Jesus was not fully God.

The Apostles Creed, according to legend, was written by the Apostles ten days after Jesus rose from the dead. In truth, a shorter version of what we know as the Apostles Creed apparently emerged in Rome as a statement of faith used during baptisms, perhaps around the year 215 A.D. – before the Nicene Creed. The final form of the Apostles Creed took centuries to develop. Remember that the Christian Church as this time was divided between East and West, due in part to the great distances involved. There was a great schism in 1054, based largely on an argument over whether the Roman Pope should have authority over the Eastern Patriarch, essentially, the eastern Pope. But the division is rooted in differences that are far older than this. In the year 285 A.D., the Emperor Diocletian split the Roman Empire into a western and an eastern half because the Empire had grown too huge to rule by a single person. Although Constantine did eventually take sole control of the entire empire, this separation is why the Nicene Creed emerged in the eastern church and was written in Greek, while the Apostles Creed was written in Latin in the west.

Let's start with the first two words: *I believe*. That is what we are all about as people of faith. We believe in something abstract, something we cannot see and touch. We have been gifted by God with the ability to believe in God.

What do we believe in? *The Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.*

In the 12th chapter of Matthew Jesus teaches us the two great commandments:

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

The beginning of this is clear: The Lord our God is one. One. We believe in a single God, not a class of petty, human-like gods, each with its own limited domain of power and the jealousies that go along with limited power. In the Book of Acts, the Apostles Peter and John are arrested and then brought before the Sadducees. These are powerful people who disapprove of their faith in Jesus, but the two Apostles boldly pray, beginning with these words: *"Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them."* Indeed, our almighty God is the creator of all that we see and all that we cannot see.

And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord. Here is a verse from the very poetic opening of the Gospel of John: *¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* I think you're getting the picture. The Apostles Creed is taken from the writings of the early Christians, the ones that make up the New Testament. *Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,* comes next. In the Gospel of Matthew, an angel appears before Joseph and tells

him this: *“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* The Apostles Creed captures a critical teaching of the Christian faith, that Jesus is both God and man. His father is God, and his mother is a mere human. We are specifically told that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit – not God. This shows the importance of the third part of the Trinity in the early Church. We tend to not focus on the Holy Spirit that much today. The early Christian writings made it clear that Jesus and the Apostles started their ministries by being visited by the Holy Spirit, Jesus at his baptism by John the Baptist and the Apostles after Jesus rose from the dead.

At this point, I’ll quit quoting the Bible. The point is that every piece of the Apostles Creed would be intimately familiar to anyone who had a Bible. But the New Testament was created from its components and turned into canon only about the time these Creeds were being created. The Apostles Creed was an abstraction of the faith, for a people who did not yet have the tradition of reading what we call the New Testament – and who were, in large part, not literate. This was something they could memorize and repeat. It was particularly important at Baptism – which was for adults, not infants – to verbalize the basics of their new

faith. The Apostles Creed was essentially a summary of the Scriptures, an abstraction of what all of us can today hold in our hands as a book and read.

Now, consider the next verse: *Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell.* We are very familiar with the concept that Jesus suffered a horrible form of death: crucifixion. It is slow, agonizing, and ends with suffocation when the victim can no longer use their legs to lift up their body, allowing them to breathe. But the early believers were just learning that their God had died the same death as slaves and criminals. This was very unlike the pagan gods that surrounded their culture. Pagans worshipped arrogant beings, not ones who were executed in a shameful, torturous fashion. And why is Pontius Pilate in this statement? Think about it. John the Baptist is not in the Apostles Creed. The Apostles themselves are not named in it. No Moses. No King David. Not even other, higher ranking Roman Officials, like Tiberius, who was emperor when Jesus died. Pilate was a low-level official, sent to a small, backwater part of the Roman Empire. He was a nobody. But he was used by God to carry out his plan of sacrificing his son for us. Pontius Pilate is very importantly symbolically – that is why he is in the Creed. Pilate represents the hand of God controlling everything.

The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to

judge the quick and the dead. Let's look at a line that is sometimes in the Apostles Creed but is often omitted. *He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; **he descended into hell**; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.* We recognize all this from the Bible, with the possible exception of: *He descended into hell.* What is all that about? There are versions of the Apostles Creed that say *He descended to the dead*, which means the same thing. This is not some late, bizarre addition to the Creed. It has been there since the origins of the Creed. It is basic Christian doctrine that Jesus rose from the dead after three days and that he ascended into Heaven. Why did he descend into hell in between? Jews at this time were just forming a notion of an afterlife, whether it was good or bad. Hades, or what we often sloppily translate as Hell, was simply a dark place where all people went when they died. It was neither fully bad nor fully good. This statement means that Jesus shared totally in a human death, just like the rest of us. God did not spare him any aspect of having to die. *From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.* Then, once he rises from the dead, he judges the quick, meaning the living, and the dead. This is a reference to the End Times, when all life on Earth ends and all people, whether they are alive or have died at some point in the past, stand before God.

I believe in the Holy Ghost. We do believe in the Holy Spirit, who resides within each of us. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity: we don't have three Gods; rather we have a God who is triune. The Holy Spirit is our comforter, who gives us peace when we are anxious, who guides us often without us even being consciously aware of the Holy Spirit's presence. *I believe in the holy catholic church. The communion of saints.* "Catholic" means universal. We certainly believe in the universality of Jesus' Church and the fellowship of all Christians living and dead. *The forgiveness of sins.* We accept God's eternal willingness to forgive. *The resurrection of the body* refers to our bodies, of course, rising at the end of time. *And the life everlasting.* Indeed, the Kingdom of God is eternal.

Remember that the word "Creed" comes to us from the roots of the Catholic Church: "creed" derives from the Latin word "*credo*", which means "I believe". That's why we begin our Apostles Creed with "I believe". It's a very special prayer, one where we lay out the basics of what we believe as Christians. As a Catholic boy, I memorized prayers easily. Maybe if it had been more work for me to learn the standard prayers of my faith, I wouldn't have just spat out the words of so many prayers without thinking about what they mean. There was a boy in my grammar school who had a cognitive disability. He wasn't separated into a special class. He was in the classroom with us all day. We'll call him Tony. Tony couldn't memorize

prayers, but the sisters still wanted him to learn the basics of his faith. We said the Apostles Creed as a class every morning. Then, after the rest of the class would recite the Creed from memory in its entirety, he would be fed the lines by one of us, and he would only have to repeat it line by line. I would typically have to repeat each line two or three times before he could repeat it. I'm not sure if he every fully understood what he was saying. But only when I was slowly feeding the lines of the Apostles Creed to Tony, one at a time, did I have to stop and listen to what I was saying. It was Tony who taught me the basics of my faith, by causing me to slow down, and rather than rattling it all off in one huge blur of words, to teach him the words. That is why that one memorized prayer has always been so special to me. So, let's say the entire Apostles Creed together, line by line:

*I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord.
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.
Who suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried.
He descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost.
I believe in the holy catholic church;
The communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting.
Amen.*