

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	13	Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Isaiah 6:1-13; John 12:37-41; Acts 28:25-27; Matt. 28:19	
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## Creedal Christianity

### 7. Lord's Day

#### Question 22. What is then necessary for a Christian to believe?

**Answer:** All things promised us in the gospel, (a) which the articles of our catholic undoubted Christian faith briefly teach us.

(a) John 20:31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. Matt. 28:19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Mark 1:15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.

#### Question 23. What are these articles?

**Answer:** 1. I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: 2. And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord: 3. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary: 4. Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended into hell: 5. The third day he rose again from the dead: 6. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty: 7. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead: 8. I believe in the Holy Ghost: 9. I believe a holy catholic church: the communion of saints: 10. The forgiveness of sins: 11. The resurrection of the body: 12. And the life everlasting.

Christianity is, and always has been, a *creedal* religion because it has always been theological - involving doctrinal reflection and articulation. A non-theological Christianity is a contradiction in terms. Christianity without doctrinal conviction has never endured. Creeds and confessions serve to express these convictions. It needs to be said emphatically that the church has never viewed simple adherence (mental assent) to a creed or system of belief as the essence of genuine faith. "The confession of faith is never more than the mind. It commits all of life. It must be affirmed with the whole person. Hence creeds can never be learned simply from books, though this learning is surely important. They must be learned in the midst of the community of worshiping and believing people who share in a common life of which the creed is a common affirmation. The confession of faith is a living sacrifice when the believer offers by the help of words his whole personality to his Creator."<sup>1</sup> Over a hundred years ago the noted Presbyterian theologian, Robert Lewis Dabney, surveyed the ecclesiastic landscape and made this observation: "The best argument for any creed is the godly living of its professors. Protestantism used to have a grand and victorious advantage on that point. She is ceasing to wield it. The wealth begotten by her very virtues of industry, thrift, and probity has debauched many of her children. 'Jeshurun has waxen fat, and kicked.' And unbounded flood of luxury sweeps Protestant families away. A relaxed and deceitful doctrine produces its sure fruits of relaxed and degraded morals. Church discipline is nearly extinct. Meantime spurious revivalism, relying upon all species of vulgar clap-trap and sensational artifice, upon slang rhetoric and stimulating of mere animal sympathies,

instead of the pure word and spirit of God is hurrying tens of thousands of dead souls into Protestant churches. These evils have gone so far that a profession of faith in these churches has come to mean nearly as little as a professed conformity to Rome means. No shrewd man regards such a profession as any sufficient guarantee for truth or common honesty in dealing. The lawyers tell us that litigation unmasks about as much intended fraud, purposed extortion, and loose swearing in these church members as in other people. Worldly conformity is so general that the line between the church and the world has become nearly as indistinct as that between spiritual and profane living in the Romish communion. Meantime, Rome gets up no spurious revivals; she works her system with the steadiness and perseverance which used to characterize pastoral effort and family religion among Presbyterians. It is true that her cultus is intensely ritualistic; but, at least, it does not offend decent people by irreverent slang; her worship is liturgical, but her liturgies, however erroneous in doctrine, are, at least, genteel, and marked by aesthetic dignity.”<sup>2</sup> Dabney went on to warn his audience that a Protestantism that does not take theology seriously will at the same time fall victim to all sorts of error and distortion. This is one reason we need to earnestly contend for the faith that has been once and for all entrusted to the saints.

The early church, likewise, found itself in a world filled with diverse religious practices and beliefs. They too were confronted with social pluralism and were forced to zealously guard and promote the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. The Apostolic church, for instance, *did* have what amounts to miniature creeds. I Corinthians 15:3-7, Romans 1:2-4, Romans 8:32-39, Philippians 2:5-11, II Timothy 2:8-11 and I Peter 3:18-22 are passages that manifestly appear to have been drawn up for catechetical purposes or for preaching. In the opinion of J.N.D. Kelly, they give “the gist of the Christian message in a concentrated form. A defensive, apologetic note becomes audible in the impressive array of witnesses with which it terminates.”<sup>3</sup>

## I. THE AUTHORS OF THE CREED

The Roman Catholic Church has long contended that the Apostles themselves were responsible for drawing up the creed that bears their name.<sup>4</sup> The Apostles’ Creed, according to this tradition, was composed by the Apostles on the tenth day after the Ascension under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This claims too much. It is not of primary apostolic origin. “It is not a word of God to men, but a word of men to God, in response to His revelation.”<sup>5</sup> The creed does reflect the early church beliefs and in that it can claim to be *Apostolic* in the sense that all of its Articles are to be found in the theological formulas of the first century church. So, who did write it? Herman Witsius, in his masterful treatment of this subject, points out that the language of the creed clearly indicates that it was first formulated in the heat of theological controversy. “It is probable that the purpose for which this title was originally assumed, was to distinguish the church which existed everywhere from the conventicles of heretics and schismatics, such as those of the *Novatians*, and afterwards of the *Donatists*. From these arguments we conclude, that the Creed was not the production of one author, or of one council, but was gradually enriched by numerous additions, in successive ages, on various occasions, by different hands; – traces, however, still remaining, of the old foundation upon which the rest of the articles were built.”<sup>6</sup>

## II. ITS AUTHORITY

It not only agrees exactly in its content with Scripture, it also is almost entirely expressed in the very language of Scripture. For this reason, Luther strongly commended it saying, “Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement.”<sup>7</sup> Calvin said of the Apostles’ Creed, “It sums up in a few words the main points of our redemption, and thus may serve as a tablet for us upon which we see distinctly and point the things in Christ we ought to heed.”<sup>8</sup> It claims our alliance not independently or of itself, but simply because it is derived from the teachings of Scripture.

The Apostles’ Creed is usually divided into three parts. The first part relates to GOD THE FATHER and the work of *creation*. The second part pertains to GOD THE SON and the work of *redemption*. The third section deals with GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT and the work of *sanctification* (This is in fact how Question 24 is worded). Contrary to the claims of some, the

Apostles' Creed is distinctively a trinitarian creed.<sup>9</sup> It does not seek to do anything more but express in a simple form a Christian understanding of God. It summarizes only some important Christian beliefs. "The most ancient formulary having consisted of a simple profession of the Trinity, our present Creed, which took its rise from that formulary, and in course of time was completed by the addition of various articles, is still so framed that these may all be referred to the Three Persons in the Godhead. This great doctrine remained as the Foundation of foundations, upon which the other articles were built."<sup>10</sup> Sadly, many Christians receive little, if any, instruction on the subject and have only vague ideas of what the doctrine of the Trinity means. "The Christian teaching regarding the doctrine of the Trinity," writes Allison, "should not be as daunting and intimidating as many have made it appear. This is not to say that anyone comprehends the deep mystery of the Trinity any more than one comprehends the mystery of birth or why the stomach does not digest itself. People continue to have children and to eat without exhausting the mystery in either of these subjects. As humans can learn more about childbirth and eating without dispelling their final mystery, Christians can learn more about the Trinity without comprehending its mystery."<sup>11</sup>

### III. THE TRINITY: DEFINITION

"The term 'Trinity,'" as Warfield has written, "is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. A doctrine so defined can be spoken of as a Biblical doctrine only on the principle that the sense of Scripture is Scripture. And the definition of a Biblical doctrine in such un-Biblical language can be justified only on the principle that it is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view."<sup>12</sup>

A. The Term. Trinity is formed from the word *tri-unity*. It refers to unity of three persons of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit who are co-eternal and co-equal persons, the same in substance (i.e., essence or nature), but distinct in subsistence (i.e., personality).

B. The Source. The doctrine of the Trinity is purely a revealed doctrine; it embodies a truth which has never been discovered and, in fact, never could be discovered by human reason. The Christian concept of the Trinity is completely absent from religions of the world.

Note: You may have encountered anti-trinitarian groups like the Jehovah Witnesses who contend that this is a pagan doctrine and has parallels with the various triads common in polytheistic religions: the Egyptian triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus (an analogy drawn from the family of Father, Mother, Child); the Hindu triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva symbolizing the three stages of Being, Becoming and Dissolution (pantheistic evolution). The Koran ridicules the doctrine of the Trinity by linking it with the concept of a triad. It says, "Believe in God and in His messenger [Jesus], but say nothing of the Triad. Avoid that, and you will be better off. There is only one God. Far be it from Him to have a son!... How can the Creator of heaven and earth have a son, since He has no wife?"<sup>13</sup> The Christian doctrine of the Trinity embodies much more than the notion *threeness*, and beyond their threeness these triads have nothing in common with the doctrine of the Trinity.

C. Analogies. Despite well-meaning efforts to illustrate the Trinity by human analogy, it is a doctrine that is incapable of proof from reason. In His trinitarian nature, God is unique. There is nothing in all creation that is like Him in this respect. This is not to say that we cannot see a trinitarian hand print, as it were, in creation – we simply cannot illustrate the doctrine of the trinity from creation without falling seriously short of the truth.

#### IV. THE BIBLICAL RECORD

You will frequently hear people say something like, “Show me a verse in the Bible that clearly teaches that God is a trinity!” The doctrine of the Trinity is not directly formulated as an affirmative proposition in any single text, but it is indirectly formulated in pages of the Scripture and these statements about God must be collected, collated and combined to properly give us a biblical theology of the being of God.

A. The Old Testament Record. We cannot speak broadly of the revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament, and we must not seek to force this doctrine in passages that do not address this subject. However, in light of the New Testament, we can say that the Old Testament does shed considerable light on the subject (cf. Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 61:1, 63:9-12; Haggai 2:5, 6). Thus, in the Old Testament development of the doctrine of God, there is the suggestion that God is not a simple monad or abstract concept, and that the Old Testament serves to prepare for the complete revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament. In this sense, the illustration provided by Warfield is most helpful. The Old Testament may be likened to a room richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of more light brings into it nothing which was not in it before, but it brings out into clearer view much of what was already there but was only dimly seen or even unseen before.<sup>14</sup>

B. The New Testament Record. We should realize that the New Testament writers sensed *no* incongruity whatsoever between their doctrine of God and the Old Testament. They were not the least bit aware of any contradiction, nor did they see themselves as advancing some novel innovation. The God of the Old Testament was their God, and their God was triune. We do not find the doctrine of the Trinity suddenly appearing like a bolt out of the blue on the pages of the New Testament. It does not appear in the New Testament in terms of development, but the revelation of the Trinity was made, not in word, but in deed. It was made manifest in the incarnation of God the Son and in the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit.

#### V. SPECIFIC TEXTS: THE GOSPELS

Note the following passages in which the three persons are brought together.

A. The Birth Narratives. (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35)

Here the Holy Spirit is the active agent in the production of a divine effect which is ascribed to the power of the Most High, and the child thus brought into the world is given the majestic designation, Son of God. Note that in the Matthew account, the deity of the child is underscored *twice* (verses 21 and 23).

B. The Baptism Account. (Matthew 3:16, 17; Mark 1:10, 11; Luke 3:21, 22; John 1:32-34)  
The Spirit descends in visible form; the Father's voice is heard and is addressed to the Son.

C. The Baptism Formula. (Matthew 28:19)

Note the way in which the text is actually worded. It does *not* say “in the names (plural) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” *Nor* does it say “in the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit” (as if it referred to three different beings). Likewise, it does *not* say “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (as if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit might be taken as merely three designations of a single person). Rather, the text asserts the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of a single name, and throws the emphasis upon the distinctiveness of each by introducing each in turn with the repeated article (of the Father, of the Son, of the

Holy Spirit). These three are one (God is not one *and* three; He is one *in* three) and all unite in a profound sense in the common participation of the one Name, but each with distinct personality.

Note: The significance of the term “Name”: The Jews did not think of the name, as we are accustomed to doing, as a mere external symbol, but rather as the adequate expression of the innermost being of its bearer. In His name the Being of God finds expression; and the name of God – “this glorious and fearful name, Jehovah thy God” (Deuteronomy 28:58) – was a most sacred thing, being indeed virtually equivalent to God Himself (cf. Isaiah 30:27; 59:19). As the sufficient representative of the majesty of Jehovah, it was a terrible thing to “blaspheme the Name” (Leviticus 24:11), cf. also Jeremiah 14:19; Isaiah 63:19; Daniel 9:18, 19. W.G.T. Shedd makes the following remark: “Paul asks in amazement, if the Corinthians were baptized in the name of Paul? I Cor. 1:13. When it is said that the Israelites ‘were all baptized unto Moses’ (EIS TON MŌSĒN), 1 Cor. 10:2, the meaning is not that they were baptized unto the *name* (EIS TO ONOMA) of Moses, but with reference to (EIS) the Mosaic doctrines and ritual; as persons were said to be baptized ‘unto John’s baptism’ (Acts 19:3), in confirmation of their belief in John the Baptist’s mission and preaching.”<sup>15</sup>

CONCLUSION: James Pettigru Boyce, the founder and first professor of theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in commenting on Matthew 28:19 said: “This act of baptism is such as to involve the divinity as well as the personality of the Three, for it is an act of worship such as can be paid to God only; it is a profession of faith in God and his righteousness, which can be due to God only; and it is a pledge of fealty, such as God has plainly taught he will share with no other.”<sup>16</sup> Note the accent on *worship*. In a very real sense, we tend to become like what we worship, and since we are created in the image of God, the first commandment – “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3) is not an expression of the jealousy of God for God’s sake, but for ours.

C. Fitzsimons Allison in a remarkable little book appropriately titled *The Cruelty of Heresy*, correctly observes: “We are susceptible to heretical teachings because, in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the *way we would have it* rather than the *way God has provided*, which is infinitely better for us. As they lead us into the blind alleys of self-indulgence and escape from life, heresies pander to the most unworthy tendencies of the human heart. It is astonishing how little attention has been given to these two aspects of heresy: its cruelty and its pandering to sin.”<sup>17</sup>

We cannot simply worship God as we like nor can we choose<sup>18</sup> to think of God as we like. The Bible expresses serious concern over false doctrine (heresy) and its counterpart idolatry (1 Timothy 1:3; 6:3; note the emphasis on *sound* teaching in 2 Timothy 1:13). We are exhorted to be on guard against idolatry (1 John 5:21) and alert to doctrinal deception, especially as it touches the content of the gospel (Matthew 24:4; 1 Corinthians 11:2; Galatians 1:8). In light of this, it is imperative that we have *right* (*orthodox*) beliefs about God. “There is only one question,” said Emil Brunner, “which is really serious, and that is the question concerning the being and nature of God. From this, all other questions derive their significance.”<sup>19</sup> This knowledge of God, as the Puritan Stephen Charnock long ago wrote, is more than mere head-knowledge. “This knowledge of God is not only a knowledge of God and Christ in the theory, but such a knowledge which is saving, joined with ardent love to him, cordial trust in him, as 1 Corinthians 13:12, ‘Then I shall know even as also I am known,’ i.e, I shall love and rejoice, as I am beloved and delighted in by God. It is not only a knowledge of God in his will, but a knowledge of God in his nature; both must go together; we must know him in his nature, we must be obedient to his will. The devil hath a greater knowledge of God’s being than any man upon earth, but since he is a rebel to his will, he is not happy by his knowledge. It must be such a knowledge as leads to eternal life, and hath a necessary and infallible connection with it, as the effect with the cause, which is not between a speculative knowledge and salvation. It must be therefore such a knowledge which descends from the head to the heart, which is light in the mind and heat in the affections; such a knowledge of God as includes faith in him.”<sup>20</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Knox, 1982), p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup> R. L. Dabney, *Discussions III* (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 367, 368.
- <sup>3</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, 1960), p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes I* (rpt. Baker, 1983), p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed I* (rpt. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993), p. 13.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> *What Luther Says I*, compiled by E.M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 353.
- <sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book II, Ch. XVI, Sec. 18.
- <sup>9</sup> There are those who claim to espouse the Apostles' Creed and yet deny or repudiate such doctrines as the deity of Christ, saying the Creed makes no reference to this. The Apostles' Creed was never intended to be a complete statement of all the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. People read into the Creed all sorts of things that it never intended to express. The Apostles' Creed was *intended* to be a brief and concise affirmation of orthodox belief – not a haven of protection for heterodoxy.
- <sup>10</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Apostles' Creed I* (rpt. P & R, 1993), p. 121.
- <sup>11</sup> C.F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Morehouse, 1994), p. 67.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield II* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 133.
- <sup>13</sup> As cited in F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics I* (Concordia, 1950), p. 389.
- <sup>14</sup> Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
- <sup>15</sup> W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology I* (rpt. Zondervan, 1971), p. 259.
- <sup>16</sup> J.P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (rpt. Christian Gospel Foundation, N.D.), p. 134.
- <sup>17</sup> C.F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Morehouse, 1994), p. 17.
- <sup>18</sup> Our word “heresy” comes from the Greek word HAIREISIS which, interestingly enough, has as its root meaning “to choose.” A heretic is someone who *chooses* his own beliefs. The adjective is used by Paul in Titus 3:10 in reference to a person who is divisive or facetious. Thus, a heretic came to refer to someone who promotes false teaching and brings division.
- <sup>19</sup> As cited in Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations: God the Almighty* (IVP, 1995).
- <sup>20</sup> *The Works of Stephen Charnock IV* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 10.