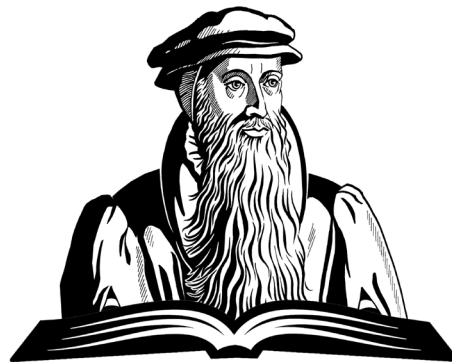

VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: THE APOSTLES' CREED

LECTURE 1 INTRODUCTION

Lecturer Presenter: Rev. Cornelis Harinck



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

THE APOSTLES' CREED

13 LECTURES

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THE APOSTLES' CREED

Rev. Cornelis Harinck

Transcript—Lecture 1

Introduction

Dear listener, welcome to a series of lectures on the Apostles' Creed. I will start with an introduction about creeds in general and the Apostles' Creed in particular.

The word “creed” sounds not very attractive. Dogma, doctrine, creeds, confessions and catechisms are not popular today. Many say, “No words, but deeds. It turns not on what we confess or believe, but on what we are and do in this world.” Yet, the first Christians deemed dogma important, for we read of the church after Pentecost, “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine”—Acts 2, verse 42. And that is precisely what we intend to do.

When you read the name, *Apostles' Creed*, you might ask, What is the Apostles' Creed? You might even ask, What is a creed? The name, Apostles' Creed, reminds us of the apostles of Jesus Christ. What an encouragement would it be for the church today, if the apostles were still among us, but they have died long ago. However, we do have the Apostles' Creed, a confession based upon the doctrine and the teachings of the apostles.

The word “creed” is a Latin word, which means, “I believe.” The Apostles' Creed is a confession whereby the believer says, “This is what I believe,” and by which the church says this is what it believes. To say it more dogmatically, a creed is a formal and foundational statement of what a Christian believes regarding God and salvation. A creed is a confession of faith and a summary of Christian doctrines. The Apostles' Creed is such a creed or confession—a very short and concise confession of faith, containing only 113 words that articulate all the foundational truths of Christianity. It is the most basic statement of Christian belief.

The Apostles' Creed is a very ancient creed, even the oldest creedal document of the Christian church. It brings us back to the early days of Christianity. In the early church, there arose a need for some sort of confession of faith to instruct new believers. As the church began to expand, she needed a means to identify those that were truly converted to the Christian faith. Most vital were the questions, “Who may be baptized?” and “What is necessary to be baptized?” In Acts 8, verse 37, we read that Philip required that the eunuch would confess his faith in the Gospel, before he could be baptized. He said to him, If you believe with all your heart, you may. The eunuch responded, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” After that confession, he was baptized by Philip. This became the rule in the Christian congregations. Baptism was never administered without a confession of faith. Even as the eunuch first had to make a confession of faith before he was baptized, so everyone who wanted to be baptized had to make a public confession of the Christian faith. This was mandatory in all Christian congregations.

Furthermore, baptism was administered in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Before being baptized, the converts had to confess their belief in God the Father and creation, in God the Son and redemption, and in God the Holy Ghost and sanctification. This mandatory profession of faith for new converts culminated in the formulation of certain rules of faith. They served as a baptismal confession.

There were certain rules of faith in the Christian congregations already in the second century that articulated what was necessary to believe. They focused on the doctrine of the Trinity and confessed what the Christian believed about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. It was around the year 100 AD, after Christ, that the congregation in Rome already had creedal statements which were used at baptism. They were almost identical to the later-accepted twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed.

The name, Apostles' Creed, is therefore somewhat misleading. Contrary to what the name

might suggest, this creed was not authored by the twelve apostles. Legend has it that before the apostles parted ways, and went out from Jerusalem into the heathen world to preach the gospel, each of them wrote an article of faith. That would explain why the Apostles' Creed contains twelve articles, and how the Apostles' Creed came into existence. However, there is no evidence in support of this claim. It is merely a legend and is not based on facts.

The formulation of the early rules of faith have gradually emerged over time into the Apostles' Creed, as we know it today. The doctrine confessed in the Apostles' Creed began to serve in the early church as a paradigm for the instruction of the catechumen—people being prepared for baptism. The Apostles' Creed was therefore not the result of a synodical meeting, but originated in and emerged from the life and practice of the early Christian congregations. This fact teaches a very important truth. The Apostles' Creed was already in existence before the councils and synods accepted this creed as the common confession of the Christian church.

The Apostles' Creed was not imposed upon the church by a decision of either a council, a synod, a pope or a magistrate. Rather, it emerged from the teachings of the apostles and the practice of the early Christian churches. It came spontaneously into existence. It emerged from the bosom of the church. The Apostles' Creed united the local congregations as members of the same body, the church of Jesus Christ. As to the name, Apostles' Creed, it simply communicates that these articles conform to the teachings of the apostles.

There are certain churches and denominations that are very much opposed to creeds and confessions. Pentecostal churches, charismatic churches, the Assembly of Believers, and other evangelical churches come to mind here. They resist strongly against all creeds and regulations, which by synods and councils are forced upon the church. They deem that confessions and creeds are man-made and thus, ought to be rejected. Their slogan is, "No creed but the Bible. No creed but Christ. Not a doctrine, but the Lord." They say, "The Bible is my creed, and Christ is my confession." These statements contain a truth that is worthy of emulation. We agree wholeheartedly with the thought that nothing else can replace the Bible as the sole authority for doctrine and practice in life. We also agree with the motto that nothing can replace Christ. He is, in the words of Peter, the only name given under heaven among men, whereby we must be saved—Acts 4, verse 12.

The difficulty, however, is that when one has neither a creed nor a confession, one holds to a notion that is not Biblical. It is Biblical for the church of Christ to have a creed. The Bible is filled with creedal statements and confessions. In fact, we already encounter creeds in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, we read of the confession of the people of Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." This is indeed a creed and a very important creed for the Jew, for this creed confesses the uniqueness and the individuality of God. Also, the New Testament contains creeds and confessions. The Gospel writings are filled with testimonies about Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. In John 3, verse 18, it is said, He who believes in the Son has everlasting life and he who does not believe is condemned already, "because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." We read the testimony of Jesus himself, who declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me"—John 14, verse 6. We can think of Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Another very old creed is recorded, in 1 Timothy 3, verse 16: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." In Acts 8, verse 37, we read the confession of the Ethiopian eunuch, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." This creedal confession was required of all who desired to be baptized. We find in Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, a very important creed that was already embraced by the first New Testament Christians. The apostle states of Christ, "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

These inspired statements that speak of Christ were sung as hymns in the gathering of the congregations. They were hymnodic creeds, liturgical expressions of what was believed. They were recited in their gatherings, even as in some churches today, the Apostles' Creed is recited. It is reported in the first century, by the Roman governors, that Christians were people who gathered

together on the evening of the day of the sun, to sing and praise their crucified God.

Paul the apostle stresses the necessity of believing certain basic elements of Christianity. He admonishes the Christians at Corinth, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also you have received, and wherein you stand; by which also you are saved, if you keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless you have believed in vain.” Then follows a summary of the facts concerning Christ: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” This sounds very much like a creed, and a confession, articulating what a Christian church believed regarding Jesus Christ.

The early Christians had creeds and confessions. One of the oldest statements that united the early Christians was the confession, “Jesus is Lord!” They confessed Jesus to be Lord over all. They called Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior, and the Victor over death. The early Christians had a symbol called an “ichthus,” a fish. Ichthus is the Greek word for fish. The meaning is found in the letters of this Greek word. They stood for: Jesus, Christ, God, Son, and Savior. Thereby the Christians confessed to believe in Jesus, as the Christ, the Son of God, and the Savior. It was a sign of recognition. When someone drew a fish you knew that you had to do with a Christian. It was a sign to recognize one another, during the time of persecution. It also served as a confession of what they believed concerning Jesus.

The Christians always have used certain statements to confess their faith. When someone asks you what you believe, you will not respond by reading the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Rather, you give a summary of what the entire Bible teaches. This is how we confess our faith in and to the world. A believer cannot witness to the world without making definitive statements about what and in whom he believes. Everyone makes use of statements to express his meaning—so also the Christian. In fact, when someone loudly exclaims, “No creed but Christ. No creed but the Bible,” he or she is uttering a creed. Such statements will then have become your creed.

Creeds, confessions and catechisms are of great value for instructing the youth and in helping us to witness to the world. Once a Christian man, accompanied with his little daughter, had a discussion with an unbeliever about prayer. He tried to explain what prayer really is, but he could not find the right words to explain it. The unbeliever kept asking, “What is prayer; what makes it so special?” Then the little girl quoted the words of the catechism she had learned and said, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgment of his mercy.” God must be thanked for the catechism, from which this girl had been taught to say what prayer really is.

It would be legitimate to object to creeds and confessions, if creeds and confessions were to set aside the supreme authority of the Bible, and the absolute sufficiency of Scripture for the knowledge of faith and practice unto salvation. Confessions and creeds that teach doctrines contrary to the teaching of the Bible ought to be rejected. The creeds of the Roman Catholic councils here come to mind, which, contrary to the teachings of the Bible, not only teach that the Pope is Christ’s vicar on earth, but also that the priest has the power to repeat the sacrifice of Christ, in the administration of the mass, for the benefit of the living and the dead. Creeds and confessions can pose a danger to the church when they are not based on Scripture. True creeds and confessions echo and repeat the doctrines of Scripture, and they are therefore subordinate to the Bible. They can pose a danger to the church when they set aside the supreme authority of the Scriptures. The church of Christ adheres to Sola Scriptura—only the Scriptures.

There is yet another reason why the church must have creeds. It is the responsibility of the church to protect the truth from error. The apostle admonishes Timothy, “Hold fast the form of sound words, which you have heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus”—2 Timothy 1, verse 13. In 1 Timothy 6, verse 20, he exclaims, “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to your trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called.” Paul posits that there is a standard of Christian teaching, there is a Christian doctrine, and there is a body of truth that God has given to the church to be retained as a form of doctrine. When you ask, What is the church? What makes a church to be the church? Paul calls the church “the pillar and ground of the truth”—1 Timothy 3, verse 15. Paul here defines the church as being the pillar and support of the truth. It is the responsibility of the church to support and defend the truth. She has received

it from God, and she may neither alter nor modify it at her own will. Rather, she must uphold and safeguard the truth as a sacred treasure entrusted to her—all to the glory of God, and for the good of men. If she fails to do so, she will no longer be the household of God. The fact that God has entrusted the truth to the church, obligates the church to uphold the standard of this truth. She does so by adhering closely to the Word of God, neither adding anything to the Word nor removing or taking anything from the Word. To the extent that she either corrupts or abandons the truth of the Scriptures, she will cease to be the pillar of the truth.

The church is also obligated to defend the truth against errors and heresies. The emergence of heresy was a matter of constant concern for the apostles, and for the leaders who followed them in the New Testament church. Since the dawn of Christianity, there have been heretics in the church, who have promulgated heretical viewpoints regarding the divinity and the humanity of Christ, and furthermore, they have intermingled the free gospel and the Judaic doctrine of salvation by the deeds of the law.

In order to uphold the truth, the church has therefore formulated creeds and confessions to defend and preserve Biblical truth. History affirms that the church has always deemed it necessary to articulate the truth by way of creedal statements. The prevalence of error and heresy has compelled the church to counter all error and heresy, by formulating and articulating the truth in more precise ways. Creeds have been and are a necessity in the life of the church.

By means of creeds, the church also defends the Christian faith against false accusations. In the early years of the Christian church, her enemies spread the rumor that Christians wanted to overthrow the reign of the Roman Caesar. When Paul and his helpers in Thessalonica were accused of undermining the authority of the Roman emperor, the enemies of the gospel said to the rulers of the city, “And these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, one Jesus”—Acts 17, verse 7. The rulers of the nation might thus be influenced with wrong impressions and ideas that the intent of the Christian church is to overthrow the authority of the government. Such circumstances make it necessary to articulate in plain and precise words what the church believes.

There was a similar situation in the Netherlands during the time of the Reformation. In order to make clear to the government that the church acknowledges the authority of the king and the government, the church formulated a confession, the Belgic Confession of Faith, as we know it today. It was set forth, on the basis of Scripture, what the church believed to be the calling and task of the government, and then furthermore, was set forth the obedience that Christians are obligated to render. It was made clear that believing in Jesus as King does not mean that the Christian does not render honor in subjection to the magistrate. The Christian is taught in the Bible to obey all those whom God has set over him. We read, in Romans 13, verse 1, “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” It is significant that Paul here is not speaking of a Christian government, but of the Roman government. However, the Bible does not obligate any Christian to do things contrary, either to any of the blessed commandments of God, or to the Christian faith. When we are forced to do so, we should obey God more than man, as we read, in Acts 5, verse 29, “Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than man.”

Creeds are necessary. They are the expression of the spiritual authority in which God has vested the church. Christ’s commission was: “Go you therefore and teach all nations”—Matthew 28, verse 19. God has authorized the church to be the official communicator of the Word of God. The church teaches the truth of God by expounding the Word of God. She expounds the Word in preaching, but also by way of her creeds and confessions.

As we reflect on all the above, we ought to be thankful for what the Lord has entrusted unto us by means of sound creeds and confessions. The labor of the church of former ages helps the church today in formulating statements and confessions that articulate the foundational truths of Scripture, as well as combat error and heresy. We may not ignore or despise our heritage. Christianity does not begin with us. We belong to a long historical progression of men and women, who have confessed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Creeds and Confessions are important. Many professing Christians regard creeds and confessions as merely man-made traditions and the expression of religious opinions. They do not understand how important they are in safeguarding and expounding Biblical truth. We read of the days

of the Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes”—Judges 21, verse 25. These words describe a spiritual anarchy. Today we are marked by the same anarchy. It marks not only in the world, but in the churches as well. The sentiment of our day is that I explain the Bible in my own way. I will believe it as I see fit. I need neither a creed nor a confession to help me to understand the truth of the Bible. Everyone has the right to explain the Bible in his own way and believe what he believes. Such people insist on a high level of tolerance, when it comes to what anyone wishes to believe. Among those who hold to such a view, creeds and confessions will not be popular. They that oppose the creeds and confessions of the church often keep a hidden agenda. They abhor the doctrines articulated in the creeds and confessions of the church, because they have their own notions about God, about Christ, about faith, and about salvation. The motto, “No creed but the Bible,” is often used as a pretext to be at liberty to proclaim error and heresy. Such opposition against the creeds of the church is often a smoke screen for the espousal of heretical views. Such individuals want no creeds because they have formulated their own creeds. They thus despise what God has given to the church by way of the creeds and confessions of former generations.

Creeds and confessions based on the Word of God are important for the church—and especially today. Old errors and heresies always reemerge in new garments. Therefore, it is important to take notice and beware of what the church in former generations has said about such heresies. The weapons to battle these errors and heresies, are often to be found in the arsenal of the creeds and confessions of the church. It is a rich heritage of the generations that have preceded us.

Creeds and confessions can keep us from wandering away from the foundational truths of the Bible, and stay in union with former generations. Creeds and confessions also further the cause of uniting different churches that confess the same truth. They are the bond that unites churches from around the world. Throughout the ages, it is especially the Apostles’ Creed that has tremendously influenced the unity of Christianity. Eastern churches, Western churches, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and other denominations all accept the Apostles’ Creed as the foundation of what they believe. And therefore, we recognize and acknowledge the Apostles’ Creed as the creed of Christianity.