



THE  
APOSTLES' CREED  
FOR TODAY



**June, 2019**

**Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Apostles' Creed for Today*.  
Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.**

I have a special fondness in my soul for Justo Gonzalez. At a meeting of the Theological Committee of what was then called the Caribbean and North American Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, I learned late one night that my father had died of a heart attack in Havana, Cuba. My cab to the airport was coming at 4am in the morning. Justo was born in Cuba. He and a few other friends, including his wife Catherine, who was also on the committee, sat up with me all night, drinking red wine and telling stories of beloved parents, until it was time to head home. So, he's a pastor as well as a theologian for me, a true doctor of the church, as we say in the Presbyterian tradition. He does his theology in the service of God's forgiving, reconciling, and comforting love.

This book is his short commentary (92 pages) on the Apostles' Creed, one of the most widely-recited summaries of the Christian faith within the worldwide church. Within the contemporary church, as it fumbles and fusses around searching for its mission in a world of belligerent diversities, many are looking back to some of the basic documents composed by earlier generations of Christians to find roots and resilience. They want to find certainties there to build a fortress against the eroding powers of modern secularism, with its focus on individualism and materialism, that they see attacking the church's purity. That is not the approach Gonzales takes to the affirmations of faith in the Apostles' Creed. And that is a good thing!

Making contemporary sense of the witness of previous generations is an essential, though not an easy, task. It is too tempting to read into the reflections of previous generations simply what you want to hear. Truly engaging in the 'dialogue' that is theology (involving the Holy Spirit, others, and you) is a much more complex and fascinating process, one that Gonzalez practices with wisdom and clarity. He gives a concise account of the contending interpretations of Christianity in the midst of which the creed was drafted, used, and revised. His approach is fully aligned with the way that The Presbyterian Church in Canada, in its most recent contemporary statement of faith, *Living Faith*, understands the use of the historic creeds in the life and witness of the church. They are to be respected as the wisdom of the church in particular times and places. That wisdom is formed in community under the promised illumination of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses the written words of the Scriptures as they witness to the living Word in Jesus Christ as the source of our understanding of what it means to be ambassadors of Christ's forgiving and reconciling love in and for all the world.

Here are the key phrases in the Apostles' Creed with the insights from Gonzales that fascinated me most. There are, of course, many more rich insights in the book that make it worth reading.

### **I believe in God the Father**

Gonzales refocuses our attention from belief about some doctrine or way of thinking to believing in the relationship within which we form and reform our understandings of the source and significance of our lives. We live and move and have our being in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This creed is structured around that trinitarian formula used in baptisms in the early church. The creed had its origins in the middle of the second century in Rome. It deals with God reconciling our relationships with the community of the Trinity, with others, and with the creation rather than simply with ideas about that God. In this sense, we are 'in' God, by God's grace, as believers. The dynamic assumed in the creed, then, is faith, as a gift from God, seeking understanding, rather than our human understanding seeking the divine.

### **Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth**

In its original Greek form, the creed affirmed that God's purposes of justice and kindness ruled the whole of God's creation. When the words were translated into Latin, the connotation shifted to emphasize power over. It's a subtle but significant shift, making it easier for those in positions of control to claim they were God's representatives in the exercise of that power. Gonzalez appreciates of the critique that liberation theology makes of this interpretation of the faith. God's rule of God's creation is rooted in care, not in dominance and exploitation.

### **And in Jesus Christ His Only Son Our Lord**

Gonzalez continues to explore the mystery of the Trinity in this chapter, pointing out that it is the foundation upon which Christians build community. Our primary focus, he argues, should not be trying to comprehend fully the mystery, but imitating this eternal community of self-giving love. To accept Jesus as the Christ, we are affirming our continuity and solidarity with the people of Israel, carriers of the covenant with Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In accepting Jesus as Lord (the earliest and most concise of Christian confessions), we are discerning every other form of allegiance in human life according to how faithfully it serves our ultimate loyalty to God's desire for the well-being of the whole creation. All of this happens because of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Who Was Conceived by the Holy Spirit Born of the Virgin Mary**

For Gonzalez, the 'virgin' dimension of Jesus birth has to do with the power of God to overcome barrenness in unique ways, a theme prominent in the Hebrew scriptures. Further, this was a real human birth, in all its messiness, through which God became powerless and dependent on a human family and community for care and education, maturing into his eventual ministry as a prophetic rabbi, calling Israel back to its true destiny as a blessing to the whole of creation.

### **Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was Crucified, Dead, and Buried**

Unlike many other religions that focus on a natural cycle of birth and death, the faith communities that trace their roots to Abraham and Sarah find God revealed in specific historical events. For Christians, it's the execution of Jesus of Nazareth as a seditious traitor to the religious and political powers of his culture. Our Lord is not simply a respected moral teacher, but God in the flesh confronting the forces of death with the realities of abundant life for the whole of creation.

### **He Descended to the Dead**

This part of the story has to do with God in Christ through the Spirit overcoming all of humanity's bondage to the tangles of sin that had imprisoned our ancestors since the first humans decided they could be gods on their own, without relating consciously and conscientiously to their Creator and Companion.

### **On the Third Day He Rose Again**

This act was more momentous than simply a human being coming back to life. It was God, reconciled with all the world, breaking out of the power of death and taking all who were in its grasp with him. The 'third day,' Sunday, then, becomes a day of celebration for this liberation, a new exodus from our entanglements with the forces of death. It is the dawning of a new creation, a new humanity, a new age in which God's desires and promises are being finally and fully fulfilled.

### **He Ascended into Heaven, Is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father**

Christians call this the 'ascension.' Its significance has been ignored in Western Christianity. It signifies that, with and through Jesus, the original intent for humanity as one community of companions of God in ruling/caring for the world has been restored. Forgiven and reconciled, we are back in our proper place of dignity and worth as friends and co-workers with the Creator.

### **And Will Come Again to Judge the Living and the Dead**

This loving, forgiving, reconciling Judge revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ encourages all to adjust and align to the justice of mutual respect and obligation found throughout the Scriptures. This is not an angry, vindictive, coercive Punisher, but a Lover of boundless energy seeking to create a new heaven and a new earth that realizes the Trinity's original intent.

### **I Believe in the Holy Spirit**

This third section of the creed – one for each person in the community of the Trinity – points to what it is like to be united with Christ in the power that brings us together to be one people across all the boundaries that have divided us in our bondage to sin. There is not longer any 'power over' that holds primacy, but only 'power with' that is free to bear the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-composure.

### **The Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints**

Our belief in the church arises from our place within the self-giving love of the Trinity. It is in this church, this communion of God's beloved friends, that we experience faith. We never experience faith as an isolated individual, since no such entity exists in God's interconnected creation. The holiness of the church arises from the presence of God at its centre and the call to be more faithful to what that presence demands in the integrated dynamics of the creation.

### **The Forgiveness of Sins**

Interestingly, this central affirmation of the Christian faith – that God's forgiving love acted definitively in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world into the community of the Trinity (2 Cor 5:19-20) – has been a source of polarization and division in the church catholic for centuries. One pole insists that the church is a holy people set apart by their moral purity. The other pole sees the church as called to serve the world as ambassadors of God's forgiving and reconciling love. In that mission, we are learning constantly how to awaken to our failures, to live through and

out of them, and to grow into our potential for contributing to God's justice and kindness with humility. Gonzalez argues that the creed advocates for the latter.

### **The Resurrection of the Body, and the Life Everlasting**

Two points are important in this final section of Gonzalez's commentary on the creed. First, that eternal life is a gift from God, not something that naturally flows from the survival of the soul. Second, God's purposes include the material as well as the spiritual. The way this will work out in the end is a mystery. Living in trust that it will work out well and in a way that values the whole of creation, material and spiritual, in the message of hope that Christian witness offers.

This has been a long book note. But it still only hints at the rich conversations that this book will provoke in your souls, nourishing them to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ. In highlighting the key insights I found in this book, I have blended Gonzalez's ideas and mine. That is how good theology is done, in conversation with reflective practitioners who have considered the essentials of the Christian faith in community with God and others in relation to the challenges and opportunities of their times and places. We trust that you will find and be welcomed into such forming and reforming conversations at Brentwood and we look forward to your contributions to them.