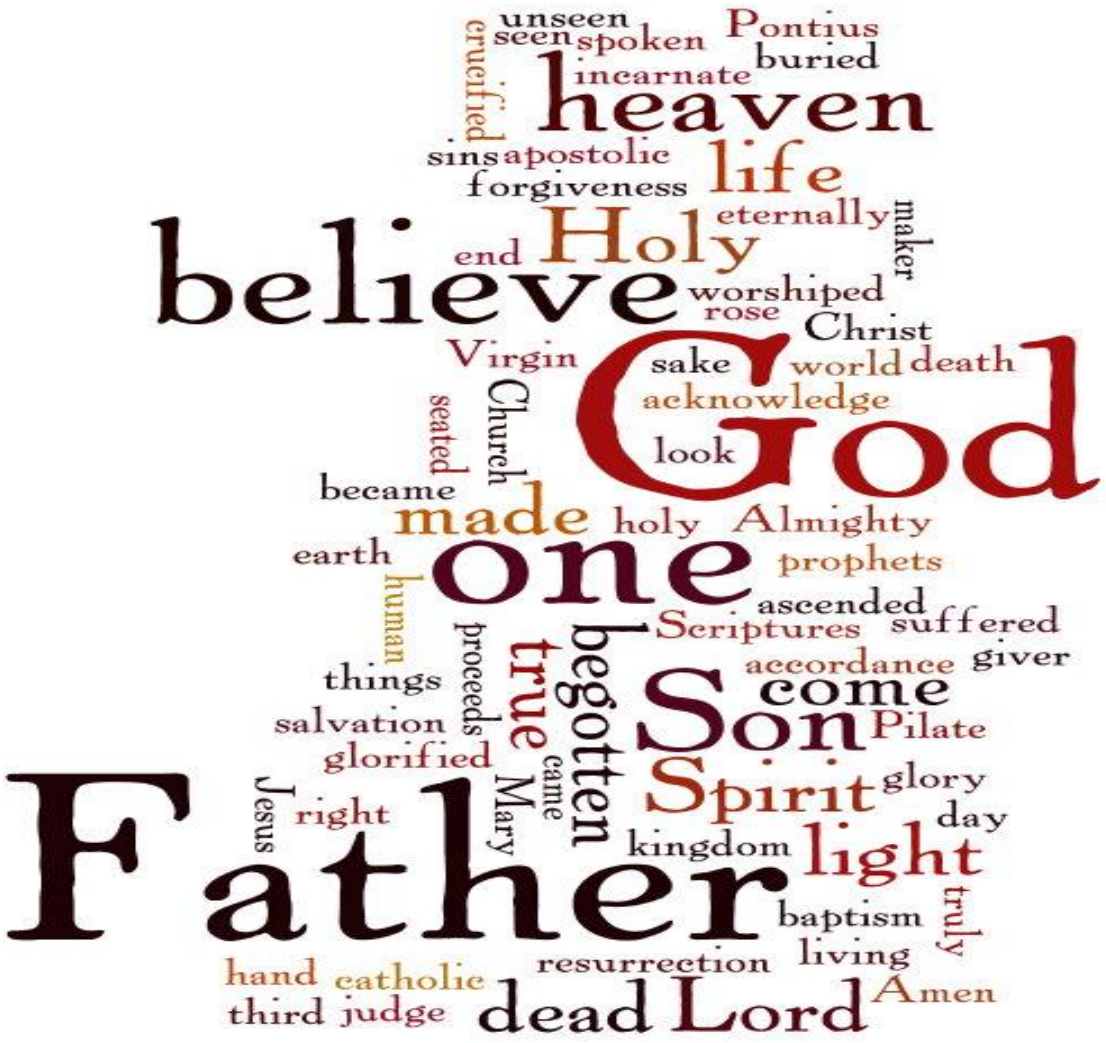
CRAIG THOMPSON

READING THE CREED BACKWARDS

THE SHAPE AND DIRECTION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH



ILLUMINATING FAITH

About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the Congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith.

Craig Thompson is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, presently placed with the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne.

Introduction

These studies began as a series of sermons preached at the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist (Uniting Church in Australian, North Melbourne). The Nicene and Apostles' Creeds feature in worship at Mark the Evangelist most Sundays, and the sermons were intended as something of a 'prelude' to saying the Creed. There are many resources available to help understand what the Creed is trying to say; these short studies attempt to explain how the Creed "works".

Using these studies

The questions at the beginning of each chapter are important. The studies seek to shift understanding from a fairly conventional reception of the Creeds to something different. This will be aided by readers being clear about what they actually believe, and the opening questions for each study are intended to be aids to this self-understanding. Having stated were we stand, and then having read and discussed the particular study, an opportunity is given to reflect again on the responses given before the study was considered.

The suggested Scripture readings are not all addressed directly in the studies. They are suggested as being related to the themes for each study and the discussion groups might find it helpful to cross reference the readings to the study at the end of each session.

Along the way a number of questions for reflection are posed alongside the text. These are for guidance and to prompt thought; feel free to discuss these in your group, or to generate your own questions!

The studies are intended for small group use, one chapter for each gathering. They will serve quite well, however, for private study.

Acknowledgements
Special thanks to Rob Gotch and Rosalie Hudson for their assistance in proof-reading and suggesting improvements on these studies!

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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THE GEOMETRY OF THE CREED: GOD AND THE WORLD

1

Exodus 3.1-6 Psalm 105
1 Corinthians 8.1-6 John 1.1-14

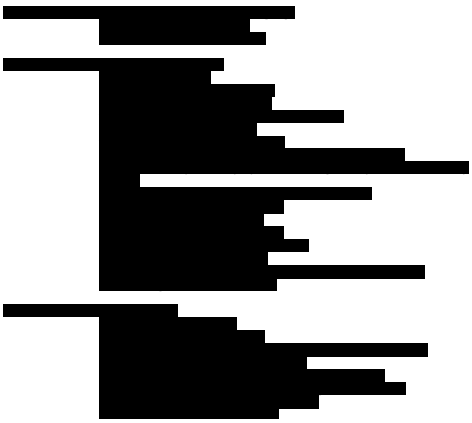
Before reading the following text for this study, take a moment to consider the Nicene Creed, given in the introductory pages. Imagine that you are charged with reading this in public, 'with meaning'. Mark the text of the Creed by underlining those parts which you think should be emphasised in such a reading.

When it comes to thinking about the Christian faith, the problem of not being able to see the wood for the trees is considerable. For the modern mind, although not much less so for the ancient mind, there are many particular aspects of Christian confession which jar our sense for what can and cannot be. It is not uncommon even for believers when saying the Creed, to feel uncomfortable or to fall silent at certain parts. The 'trees' – the details of the confession – are often problematic even if a there is a willingness to confess the faith of the church 'in general'

What elements of the Christian Creeds most trouble you? What are the least troublesome?

In these studies we will consider together the question, 'How Christians believe', drawing on the classic Christian confession as it is laid out in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, treating them as being essentially the same statement of faith. This will not be an enquiry into how it is possible to believe, and neither will we deal directly with many of the specific statements of belief in the Creed itself. Our emphasis in these studies will be rather more on the *manner* of Christian faith, considering Christian confession as less a matter of content than as a matter of 'style.'

What do you make of the suggestion that Christian confession is more a matter of style than content?



To begin our thinking around this, consider the graphic at left. This is what the Nicene Creed looks like if we block out the text so that we might see 'the wood for the trees' – the 'shape' of Christian confession – without being distracted by any particular detail. Much is communicated by what we might call the sheer *geometry* of the Creed.

Presented in this way, two things are immediately communicated about the Creed. The first is that it has three parts. To believers this is familiar enough, reflecting the trinitarian confession of the church. We will reflect more specifically on the trinitarian dimension in the last three studies. In this study we will simply notice and reflect on what is probably the second thing to strike us in this presentation of the Creed: the relative sizes of

each of the three so-called 'articles'. Formatted on the basis of one main clause per line, the first article has three lines, the third has nine lines, and the second has seventeen lines. This speaks volumes about *how* Christians believe.

The tradition of the church holds that God is to be worshipped as three 'persons', each of whom is equally divine, all three together constituting God as a Trinity (or tri-unity). And yet if we look to the geometry of the Creed we see that these three equal persons take up quite different amounts of space, if not in God Godself, at least 'on paper.' 'God the Father' – in most trinitarian doctrine something like the 'source' of the godhead – is accorded almost cursory acknowledgement; 'God the Holy Spirit' has more associated with its personhood; and 'God the Son' is runaway winner in the word count.

Again, the details – the 'trees' – are not our main concern here but the forest as a whole. In broad terms, the 'easier' religious concepts of 'god' and of 'spirit' are attended to only briefly. The reason the middle section takes so much space is that it is, religiously, the most problematic.

While it is clear enough that the Creed is formulated as a summary of Christian confession, it is not immediately evident that it was formulated in an unfriendly religious environment. That environment knew very well about gods and spirits but it had great difficulty with the notion that the crucified Jesus could have anything to do with true divinity. As the Creed plants its various trees – makes its various statements about the faith of the church – it is building up a forest which declares in uncompromising terms that, in fact, the Word which was 'with God' and 'was God' has indeed become flesh (to recall John 1) – even crucified flesh.

And so, as we look to the second article of the Creed, we might read with the following emphasis, which indicates something of what was being denied as well as the more obvious affirmative statements of the article:

Compare this to where you placed the emphases in this section of the Creed in the opening exercise. What do you make of any differences between the two?

We believe in *one* Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, *Light* from Light,
true God from true God, *begotten*, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through *him* all things were made.
For us and for our salvation *he* came down from heaven,
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and became *truly* human.
For our sake he was *crucified* under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered *death* and *was buried*.
On the third day *he* rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated
at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and *his* kingdom will have no end.

Exactly where the emphasis might be placed in a particular clause could be debated, but it is often the case that where we *today* tend to assume the emphasis should fall will miss the point. This is because we are not living out of the tensions which delivered the Creed in this form but out of different theological concerns and anxieties. For us the problem with 'he rose again' is the word 'rose'; to the fourth century (or first century) religious mind the problem is that, if anyone is going to be raised, it will not be a crucified man. For us the problem with 'born of the virgin Mary' is most likely to be 'virgin'. The ancients also had a problem with this, but the bigger problem was the word 'Mary', and the following assertion that true Godness had become 'truly human'. For us the problem with 'He will come again' is that we cannot conceive what this coming could be. In its original religious context the problem is that the crucified Jesus is the least of us; how could *he* be our judge? How could it be *his* kingdom which will have no end? When we recite the Creed, we are not listing the things we ought to believe about God and Jesus. We are engaging in a polemic – a debate about the nature of the world and its relationship to God. In a context where the stable divine was considered incapable of interacting fully with the changing, decaying world, the Creed declares exactly the opposite: in the Crucified One we see the true range and power of divinity.

What do you consider to be the most challenging theological questions today?

Do you agree with these suggestions as to where the modern mind tends to place the emphases in the Creed?

Does it help you, to understand the Creed as a polemical document? Are these disputes still relevant to you today?

This might all seem like a lot of theological irrelevance, particularly to those for whom the existence (or not) of God is itself an irrelevance. Yet the problem which has given our Creed its geometry – the tension between the biggest things which are easy and the smallest things which are hard to fit in – is not merely a theological question. The question of the relationship between the wood and the trees is ever present, whether it looks like a theological question or not. When we hear that large companies have governmental approval to sweep away the interests of hundreds of subsistence farmers, the simple god of the global economy is being honoured at the expense of 'the little people'. A particular means to economic prosperity is considered sacrosanct, at the expense of other more participatory models. In these times of great refugee movements, the enforcement of national borders prioritises national sovereignty over against the claims of non-citizens for protection. In other areas, governmental policy almost necessarily does not deal with the needs of particular persons but has to pursue a one-size-fits-all approach which never really fits, so that some get too much and others not enough. Political debates about 'dole-bludgers', disability pensions and who should pay what for aged care all reflect our struggle to reconcile the needs of the whole with the needs of individuals. More personally, when we prefer our nostalgic recollections of the way things once were over against the hard-edged realities of how they are now, we are in the realm of the general and the particular, our simple memories or dreams disabling us in our dealing with the complexity of what we actually have now.

Is it reasonable to call such powers 'gods'?

The gods – the many lords and gods of which Paul speaks (1 Corinthians 8.5) – are active in the interplay between the all and the little things. And they are everywhere. We can say, then, that while Christian faith is indeed an option we have – to take up or not to take up – it is not an optional *extra*. For we are all, Christian or not, operating with one or several of Paul's 'many lords and many gods'.

What is the basic meaning of 'truth' for you?

We are all existing as individuals within great powers which variously lift us up or threaten to crush us.

The question is, simply, how most adequately to speak the truth about the nature of our world. 'Truth', in our modern usage, is rather a bland word. It is, in fact, largely a negative word, in that its basic meaning is 'not false.' Perhaps more importantly, it is a very 'theoretical' word we associate with mere facts and figures. The Greek word we usually translate as truth in the New Testament is also a negative word, but in a very different way. The word is *alētheia*. The negative bit is the first 'a': truth is 'not-*lētheia*'. The interesting thing is that -*lētheia* is nothing like our 'false'. The root word here has to do with 'oblivion': being forgotten. Truth is that which is 'not oblivion', not forgottenness. Perhaps more evocatively, the Greek root *lēthe* is what gives us our English words *lethal* and *lethargy*. Truth is, biblically, that which is not lethal, not lethargic, does not crush into oblivion but rather brings life, vitality, restores what might otherwise have been forgotten: truth 'raises the dead'.

How might this sense of 'truth' change debates about the truth of Christian confession?

The Creed concerns itself with the relationship between ever-changing, ever-decaying, ever-being-forgotten particulars of history – us ourselves – and the constancies to which we are ever appealing for salvation or preservation in the ever-shifting world. Do those constancies uphold, value, and preserve what is changing? The Creed declares that even if the things of the world are reduced to nothing – even by death on a cross – they still do not fall outside the faithful, loving embrace of this God. And so everything finally matters, even if *we* cannot do anything about it.

The Creed is the shape it is because it reflects the conviction that the Word has indeed become flesh. Because it was the Word which was God which became our broken flesh, this Word has become for us truth and glory or, to put it more clearly: life and wholeness. This is what the church claims and declares when it says the Creed.

For further reflection

Consider the Scripture readings in the light of this material and your discussion.

Where are there contradictions between the Scripture and the study? Where do you find enhanced meaning of either the Scripture or the study?

Reflect on your response to the question or task at the beginning of the study. Would you respond differently after having read and considered the study?

THE CHURCH'S CONFESSION

2

Isaiah 43.14-21 Psalm 127
Ephesians 1.15-23 Matthew 16.13-20

Before reading the following text for this study, take a moment to consider: What are the strengths and weaknesses of having a creed or confession, whether as a 'religious' statement or more generally as a social or political one?

We live in a world filled with a cacophony of different voices. These voices are political, economic, religious and personal. They are heard over the airwaves, in the streets, in our homes and in our heads. Each voice confesses a kind of 'creed': a theory about who we are, who 'they' are, and about what is to be done between us and them. Occasionally, here and there, the cacophony resolves into dialogue; understanding is advanced, reconciliation of difference is achieved. Still, perhaps most evident to us is the difference which creates the white noise of so much differing opinion.

What creeds seem most influential where you are?

In the midst of all this is the voice of the church with its Creed. The church's Creed, at one level, is just one more voice among the many. And yet, in modern western society, the delegated place of the so-called 'religious' voice is peripheral. 'Religion', though central to the lives of many citizens, is generally considered by the body politic to belong to the realm of the private, as distinct from the public discourse about things which are not private but which we have in common as a community.

Do you believe the Christian faith to be fundamentally a public or private reality? Why?

The Scripture readings that accompany this study reflect something of the nature and scope of the people of God. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the people formed by God himself, that they might declare his praise. The psalmist sings that unless the Lord builds a house the work is in vain. From the letter to the Ephesians we read a very high ecclesiology, speaking of the church as Christ's body, the 'fullness of him who fills all in all'. And in Matthew's gospel we hear of the establishment of Peter as the foundation upon which the church would be built, and as the one who holds the keys of the kingdom.

Even to Christians there is something shocking about how the Bible sometimes describes the people of God. The shock is found in the way in which what is, in our experience, a fallible worldly and historical entity is invested with other-worldly significance. To the modern mind religion continually overreaches in this way. Our current geopolitical realities are in no small part determined by a confusion of religious convictions with apparently secular politics. As it is generally understood today, the purpose of the separation of religion and the state is to limit the influence of religious faith in the secular politics, on the conviction that such a separation

is the safest way to proceed for the largest number of the citizens of the modern, western state. This study will explore how the Creed around which the church gathers is, in fact, inherently political, and indeed more truly and comprehensively political than most seemingly secular politics.

There are two dimensions of the political character of Christian confession on which we will focus in this study. The first is the political *origin* of Christian faith. Christian belief springs from a fundamental experience which, at first glance, does not look political at all and yet gives it its peculiar political character. That fundamental experience is the resurrection of Jesus. The importance of the resurrection here is not for the reason which might first seem obvious – its miraculous character. The church's experience of the resurrection had two stages. The first was the sheer surprise of the circle of Jesus' followers: the one they saw humiliated, tortured, nailed to a cross, dead, bound and buried is now alive. This first experience of the resurrection was of the reversal of a death into life, and the emphasis of the surprised community of disciples fell on the second part of their exclamation: Jesus is *risen*.

Why do *you* think the resurrection is an important part of the Christian story?

Yet the resurrection, in itself, is rather less important than it might seem. Even if it actually happened, and the testimony of the church ended there, a sneaky little 'so what?' will eventually find its way into our hearts and minds: what can such a blip in the natural order of things actually *mean*? What can the restoration of a loved one to his friends so long ago be for us *now*, today?

In fact, the testimony of the church is not simply that Jesus 'rose'. The second aspect of the church's experience of the resurrection of Jesus was the light it shone on the cross. As the reflection of the church developed the emphasis in the preaching shifted from 'risen' to 'Jesus': *Jesus* is risen. Here the surprising thing in the proclamation is not that a dead person might stop being dead, which is remarkable enough. The surprise is, rather, that of all the people who might be raised, it was Jesus.

Does this ring true? If anyone were to be raised would you expect it to be a Jesus-type figure?

This is about as counter-intuitive to common Christian (and even non-Christian) thinking as we can get. Christians and those who've heard our story tend to imagine that, if anyone would be raised, it would be Jesus, because *we* already *know* that he is the good guy. Yet the heart of the Christian testimony is not the miracle that Jesus stopped being dead, but that, if he was indeed the divine 'Son', he died as he did in the first place. This is the contradiction at the heart of the Christian confession. This paradox is that the one who is revealed as righteous in the resurrection was also revealed as *unrighteous* by virtue of the cross (Deuteronomy 21.23; cf. Galatians 3.13). Or, at least, this was how things looked.

Do you accept that the resurrection of Jesus is God's judgement on a broken world?

Are you encouraged by the Creed and the gospel to live politically, taking an interest in matters of justice and peace?

And it is here that the second dimension of the political nature of the church's confession is revealed: the resurrection casts a judgement on the political machinations which led to Jesus' crucifixion. If the resurrection is positive in that it reveals the power of God even over death, it is negative in that it declares judgement on the judgement of

those who crucified Jesus. Jesus was judged unrighteous, and that judgement was apparently confirmed in the manner of his death. Yet this judgement is itself judged when, unexpectedly, Jesus returns to be reckoned with again. That the crucifixion was demanded as an act of religious piety – ridding the community of a dangerous heretic – makes the judgement all the more poignant. The capacity of the pious to recognise the presence or absence of God is thrown radically into question. The people of God – in the first instance the Jews, in the second instance the church – fundamentally misunderstands the presence of God.

This is embodied in the Creed itself. In the first of these studies we noted that the shape or 'geometry' of the Creed reflects the conviction that God and the world have a defining intersection in the person of the Son. This was a revolutionary thought in its context, and its oddness is reflected in the second article (or main paragraph) being so much longer than the other two. But the intersection of God and the world in Jesus is not merely a formal or theoretical one. It is an intersection through a particular history – the history of a person who was crucified under certain historical circumstances for particular political and religious reasons. That is, politics – the interactions of human beings in their social affairs – is here in the middle of the church's account of how its God works, and this political action is characterised as *violence towards God*. The Creed is a confession, in the sense of being a communal statement of particular things to which believers adhere. But it is also a confession in the sense that it speaks a truth about the nature of human political existence. It does not simply inject another religious opinion into the already overloaded debates, assaulting further the hearing of anyone who dares uncover their ears. It declares an opinion, indeed, but it properly does so in the *spirit* of confession. It declares, from the point of view of salvation, that creeds and confessions kill – kill even the Lord of glory they are intended to glorify (cf. 1 Corinthians 2.8). *Jesus* is risen, the Creed proclaims, reminding us at the same time that he did not die of natural causes but because of creeds – convictions about piety and political stability which determined that Jesus could not be the Christ.

Do you see any relationship between a confession of faith and the confession of sin?

Do all creeds kill in the end? Why, or why not? Is the Creed of the church dangerous in this way?

We have here, we might say, a creed against creeds – a statement of the faith we confess which passes judgement on us and calls us to confession not now merely of our faith, but of our sin. It is in this sense that the political character of Christian confession is more comprehensively political than other options, for here the dynamic of our lives together is described and declared to be overcome. We must believe something, and act. But as pious, as well-calculated or as well-intended as these actions may be, it is no difficult thing to miss the mark. (It is perhaps worth noting that 'miss the mark' – as an archer might miss the target – is the base meaning of the Greek word *harmatia*, which usually sits behind the word 'sin' in English Bibles.)

Does this understanding of the Creed as reflecting God's judgement aid your experience of the liturgical confession of sin?

Our righteousness is in relation not to the correctness of our creeds and prayers or the intentions behind our actions – whether these creeds look religious or secular. Our righteousness is in God's making good of us. What it means for God to make good of us we will consider in more depth in the following studies.

Do you experience a recitation of the Creed as an act of humility?

The important point here is, perhaps, a surprising one: that to confess the Creed of the church is an act of humility. We are present in a number of ways in the Creed but not least are we present as those whose seeming good judgement is itself judged, and we are shown to be those in whose hands laws and creeds become hard and sharp and instruments of death.

To confess the faith of the church is not simply to express an opinion about what is the case with respect to God. It is also to speak about what we are capable of, for evil as well as for good. And it is to give thanks that, though our very best can sometimes lead us to disaster, the story the Creed tells is of God's capacity to take even our disasters and use these not for condemnation but for healing, forgiveness and new life.

For further reflection

Consider the Scripture readings in the light of this material and your discussion.

Where are there contradictions between the Scripture and the study? Where do you find enhanced meaning of either the Scripture or the study?

Reflect on your response to the question or task at the beginning of the study. Would you respond differently after having read and considered the study?

IN THE BEGINNING: THE SPIRIT

3

Before reading the following text for this study, take a moment to consider: If you were to tell the Christian story, where would you begin, where would you end?

Genesis 2.4-7 Psalm 104
Galatians 4.1-7 John 3.1-10

The *Dead Poets' Society* tells the story of events surrounding the arrival of a new English teacher in a strongly traditional school, the teacher being wholly unorthodox in his approach to his subject. One of the most memorable moments in the film is when he invites his entire class forward to stand on his desk and view the classroom from that vantage point. The purpose of this is to show the students that from there the room appears differently from where they usually stand, which is one of the themes of the whole film, as dismal an image of the world as it finally portrays.

In its own peculiar way, dealing with the risen, crucified Jesus ought to effect in those who hear his story properly told a kind of table-standing experience. The problem is that we easily become familiar with what was once re-visionary in this way.

In the case of the Creeds, we have seen in the first two studies that they embody in their structure and content a polemic in their own context – a re-orientation – of the thinking about the divine and the human. For us today, however, this re-orientation is largely hidden because we receive the Creed as something of a historical relic, even if a very important one. We recognise its threefold character and we understand – so we think – its details, whether or not we assent to them.

What is much harder to see, and requires a kind of standing-on-the-table, is our familiarity with how the Creed is typically laid out and used. For example, and what will be our main focus in this study: the Creed has what we might consider to be a natural beginning-to-end structure. Thus, the creation of the world features in the first article, history and its salvation features in the second, and the 'end things' feature in the last article. The Creed reads like a history which, of course, it is, even if sometimes hotly contested. The chronologically first thing is followed by the second thing and then the third thing.

Is this your sense for how the Creed reads and is to be understood? From where does this idea come?

Like any history, this one is told for a reason which is, fundamentally, to communicate a truth. Yet it can feel like a rather cheap truth – one which does not actually ask very much of us. And so the saying of the Creed can feel a hollow act, even for believers: perhaps true, in the sense of something to which we assent, but also a somewhat sterile.

With this in mind, let us consider reading the Creed differently. In particular, let us begin to read it 'backwards', beginning with the third article on the Spirit and ending with the article relating to the Father. The rationale for this has to do with the difference *and the relationship* between how things *happen* chronologically and how we *know* these things. While this might seem very technical, it is important. It might seem that there are simpler thoughts to have about ourselves and the things of God, but most of us are rather less simple than we imagine. By sheer familiarity, how we have been taught to think about ourselves and God seems the most straightforward way; the intention of this study is to challenge that thought.

Chronologically, it makes sense to tell the story as the unfolding of God's dealings with history – first creation, then the inauguration of salvation and finally its consummation in the 'end times'. This is in the order in which things *happen* and it is the way we are accustomed to telling stories. But existentially, we *experience* these things the other way around. Faith begins not with belief in God the Father, but springs out of the work of the Spirit-created and -enabled church. Or, at least, specifically Christian faith begins in this way, because *this* particular Spirit bears witness to *Jesus* as the Christ. It is in the context of the church, as part of the communion of saints, being forgiven, and raised to a life of eternal qualities, that we learn to say the Creed with any confidence.

Having started here, we can move from the third to the second article. This is largely about the specific history and destiny of Jesus but it is critical, as the fuller text of the Nicene Creed has it, that Jesus does this as one 'truly human'. The human existence described under the heading of the Spirit as church, communion, forgiveness and resurrection is a participation in the authentic humanity which was Jesus' own.

And the point of our sharing in that humanity is that we might know God as Jesus did: as 'Father' and as source of all things. By the power of the Spirit creating the church we are conformed to and incorporated into the humanity of Jesus the Son, that we might know God the Father as he does. Or, as Paul puts it in the letter to the Galatians: 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'' (Galatians 4.6).

Such a reading-backwards is more than just a cute proposal. If we re-order the Creed in this way, things which seemed to present obvious problems are re-configured. For example, when the Creed is read from the top down, at least three things at the very beginning strike the modern mind as problematic: 'God', Father' and 'creation'. As a bland history of God these credall affirmations are presented as premises which simply have to be accepted. If the article on the Father comes last, however, they have a very different *feel*. The God met here is now not the premise for the existence of the world – its cause – but the Father who has already worked through the Spirit and the Son a true humanity in broken human history. This Father is not *our* Father but the agent in relation to whom Jesus realised that true humanity. And, perhaps most surprisingly, 'creation' is now not what comes first but what comes last. That is, we know the world as a creation with a creator only when we share in the humanity and devotion of Jesus himself. Creation is now not the basis for all that happens in history but the

goal of all that happens in history: we become creatures when finally, in the Spirit, we know God as Jesus did.

We will look at this in a little more detail in the last two studies on the second and first articles of the Creed. It is enough now if the Creed might become for us more than simply a well-ordered list of things which should be said about God.

What could 'getting to the beginning too soon' mean?

How might the Creed be *formative* in this way?

Starting the Creed – or at least, starting *unthinkingly* – with the first article can be to get to the beginning too soon. Our confession of faith is not only *what* we believe but *how* we have come to believe it. Instead of reading the Creed as a kind of world history, a 'macro' history from a chronological beginning to an end, reciting the Creed 'backwards' tells a history which is not so much '*in*formative' as simply formative. This formation takes place in the Spirit-ed community of faith. It is God who enables us to begin to confess, that it might, in the end, indeed be God that we confess. Beginning in the Spirit-ed community we are shaped into the humanity of Jesus, in order to know the heart of God.

Is this something worth a try in your worship community?

In churches in which the Creed is regularly used – whether the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed – it is an interesting exercise to say it backwards. As annoying as it would doubtless be for some, it serves as a 'standing on the table' by which we can catch a glimpse of something new in what is so familiar. In a clumsy kind of way, this is a poetic re-ordering of our language in order to understand better what we actually mean to say, how we believe.

In this way the spirit in which the church confesses its faith is seen to be the Spirit which is its very possibility, that such faith be not simply stuff we believe but what and whose we are to become.

For further reflection

Consider the Scripture readings in the light of this material and your discussion.

Where are there contradictions between the Scripture and the study? Where do you find enhanced meaning of either the Scripture or the study?

Reflect on your response to the question or task at the beginning of the study. Would you respond differently after having read and considered the study?

4

Genesis 1.26-31 Psalm 8
Romans 8.18-30 John 17.20-26

ALONG THE WAY: IN THE HUMANITY OF THE SON

Before reading the following text for this study, take a moment to consider: What does it mean to say that Jesus is 'the image of God'?

In a recent book on the place of Christian belief in the postmodern world, English theologian Graham Ward remarks that the age in which we live is one which demands what he calls 'impolite' theology. Fundamentally, his point is the need for theology which is not limited by assumptions about what is and is not good 'form' for theological thinking, not limited by the accepted norms and so, in this sense, 'impolite'. Ours is a world of crises, both in the common sense that there are many things which demand our response but also in the literal and more important sense of crisis: a world which requires judgements be made (the Greek root *krisis* means 'judgement').

In what ways might Christians be overly polite in public dialogue? What are the limits to 'impoliteness' in public dialogue about God?

We are, in a sense, trying to be impolite in our treatment of the Creed during the course of these studies. We are attempting to set aside the typical problems which the Creedal statements are often thought to present and we are seeking instead to ask about the *polis* – the 'city' or community – which confesses this Creed and is implied in it. That is, we are asking after what it means to be *properly* 'polite' – part of the *polis*, the city. *This* politeness is not civility (to shift from the Greek root to a Latin one). It is a politeness which is concerned with the truths of living in human community. The play between the words '*polis*' and 'polite' is important here. It is *polis* which gives us polity, politics, policy, police, politeness – all of which have to do with the description or regulation of our lives together. In a sense, our newspapers are filled with the question of how, in the broadest sense, we are going at being 'polite' in living with each other.

After noting in our first study the geometry of the Creed – its shape – we then looked at it as one confession among many. In the third study we began a process of reading the Creed 'backwards', beginning with a brief overview of the third article of the Creed, on the Spirit. There we encountered a promised human *polis* in quite general terms. The Spirit is the agent by which is formed the church, a 'community of saints' which is 'called out' from the broader human community (Greek: *ek-klesia*, church, means *out-called*). This community is marked by a certain mode of relationship – forgiveness – and has a particular destiny: the resurrection

to eternal life of the common body (the 'body' is, in the New Testament, another relational or 'pol-ite' concept).

If we continue to read the Creed backwards, we come next to the article on the Son. As we noted in the first study, this is the longest because it poses the most difficult religious problem: that God and the world have coincided in the historical person Jesus. This is most insistently put in the Nicene Creed: Jesus the only Son is 'eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made'. Following on from these obviously divine attributes are obviously human ones: Jesus was born, suffered, died and was buried. Today, as then, the human, historical attributes of Jesus are largely uncontroversial. The theology, however, continues to create problems. For some believers who want to believe in accord with the tradition, how God is one and three remains a problem which cannot quite be resolved. For others the problem is more fundamental, being a matter of whether or not Jesus has a unique and defining connection to the God of all things.

At stake in all this is our understanding of God – our 'image' of God. How much does this little word encompass? Also at stake here, and typically overlooked, is our image of ourselves: the significance of the divine for the human, and vice-versa. Scripturally, 'image of God' is an anthropological category, and not a theological one – a point more to the nature of the human being than to the nature of God. The 'image of God', as we encounter it in Genesis 1.27, is not a divine thing but a marker of what is human. To declare that Jesus is the 'image of God' is then, perhaps most unexpectedly, to say that he too is a human being. The interplay between Jesus as the image of God and Adam as the image of God is particularly strong in Paul's accounts of how Jesus encapsulates humankind. But the important point is that all the affirmations of the exalted identity of Jesus as the Son are, at the same time, statements of the authenticity of his humanity. Jesus is not, then the *image of God*; the emphasis shifts: *Jesus* is the image of God.

What does it mean to you that you are created in the image of God? What does it add to our understanding of being human that humanness has its basis in the person of Jesus?

And this brings us back to theological impoliteness. The impoliteness is not so much the difficulties of the doctrine of the Trinity, which trip up many people. It is more literally an impoliteness – a challenge to what we imagine humanity to be, to how we order our *polis*, our lives together.

Can such 'impoliteness' – being 'against the city' – also be *for* the city?

'…not simply to die, but to live': how does this change your understanding of Jesus' saving work?

As an account of salvation history it is easy to reduce the history of Jesus to a special case; as the Creed declares, it is 'for us and for our salvation' that he becomes truly human. Linked to this is a loose but widely held understanding that Jesus 'had to die' as he did, in order to fulfil the requirements of some divine economy of salvation. But if Jesus is the image of God, *the* human being, then he was sent not simply to die but to live. The impoliteness in all of this is the acknowledgement of the tragedy that a true human being is crushed by untruth in human community. There is an indictment, a judgement, here. That judgement is: that the human city operates such that it is

acceptable, even necessary, for some to be discarded and forgotten. In the first study we noted that 'truth', in biblical Greek, does not have the bland sense 'not false' but the much stronger, more human sense of 'not forgotten', not assigned to oblivion. Drawing on this, the truth of the Creed is that it declares that a particular man discarded is not forgotten, as those who discarded him intended he be forgotten. This impoliteness in the Creed is the same as any impoliteness which remembers others 'better' forgotten. It is the impoliteness which reminds us that, while the modern state might insist on regulating its borders, this was not a freedom accorded the indigenous people of the New World whose brutal displacement made such modern nations possible. It is the impoliteness which reminds us that the lifestyle we go to war to protect is in no small part enabled by the appalling wages and working conditions of those who sew our clothes, gather our food and piece together our phones. It is the impoliteness which draws to our attention that the old are not an impediment and cannot be discarded. It is the impoliteness which reminds us that English is not God's native language. It is the impoliteness of the whistle-blower. Some things, we would admit, are better forgotten, better 'un-true', in the biblical sense.

Contrary to such untruth, we might say that the resurrection was God's 'remembering' of Jesus, and the Creed is the means by which *we* remember *God's* remembering. And, in remembering this, we orient ourselves towards a new kind of community, a new *polis*, a new kind of 'politeness'. For all the despair which the tragedy of the death of Jesus might effect in us, for all the indictment it contains, the Creed is a document of hope. It *is* 'for us and for our salvation' that the Son takes on our humanity. While we are wont to forget, and often simply just want to forget, we are not ourselves forgotten. By the power of the Spirit we are gathered into a community whose business is not forgetfulness, but remembrance. This remembrance – realised in the bread and the cup – is a making present again of the shape of Jesus' own humanity; fed by the body of Christ we become the body of Christ, we are conformed to his image, his humanity. It is the way in which Jesus is human which will not be forgotten.

How does the authentic humanity of Jesus challenge you in terms of the way you live?

Reading the Creed 'backwards' we speak of the Spirit which is the basis of our coming to faith, the beginning of our knowing and formation, propelling us into a new kind of being, a new humanity, which is the humanity of Christ himself. This is the declaration, and the promise, of the Creed the church confesses. And it is then, in the Spirit-realised humanity of Jesus, that we are finally enabled to know God as Jesus himself did, as 'Father'. We will consider this in more detail in the final study.

For further reflection

Consider the Scripture readings in the light of this material and your discussion.

Where are there contradictions between the Scripture and the study? Where do you find enhanced meaning of either the Scripture or the study?

Reflect on your response to the question or task at the beginning of the study. Would you respond differently after having read and considered the study?

5

Exodus 33.12-23 Psalm 99
Romans 8.12-17 John 1.1-18

IN THE END: THE FATHER

Before reading the following text for this study, take a moment to consider: What is the end, the goal, of Christian belief? If you are a Christian, why do you believe? What do you hope for?

In this final study we will pose and unpack the question of the end of faith, understanding 'end' in the sense of goal: that 'unto which' we believe, that towards which our believing is oriented.

It is an occupational hazard of Christian ministers that people often feel constrained to tell them what they do or do not believe. This is apparently a kind of pre-emptive strike by which people protect themselves from evangelical ambush by the minister. A common account of unbelief is, 'I'm not religious: I do not believe there's anything after you die'. This is often the opening justification for some gloriously hedonistic pursuit the non-confessor enjoys because this life is all there is and we might as well make the most of it!

When we read through a statement like the church's Creed, it makes sense that people imagine that this is what faith is about: life after death. The Creed speaks of a beginning (the creation), a middle (the history of Jesus, and all of us) and an end (resurrection of the body and the life everlasting). If we strip out the details which make it Christian and historically specific (the trinitarian names, with Jesus, Mary and Pilate), the Creed is not much different from any other so-called 'religious' view of the world, of which there are very many. The 'end of faith' – that unto which we are believing – is easily construed as being a buffer against our undeniable mortality.

The previous two studies, however, have argued that there is much to be said for reading the Creed 'backwards'. The reason for doing this is that in such a reading the end of faith is not 'the life everlasting' but the person of the divine Father, the creator. On this reading, that *unto which* we believe – the end or goal of our faith – is not security in the face of death but knowledge of the heart of God.

The suggested gospel reading for this study extended slightly the reading we had on the first study of this series. It is the 'prologue' to John's gospel, which we normally encounter around Christmas. John's prologue is composed as a preface to the narrative of the body of John's gospel, serving to indicate what the reader could expect to discover in what follows. John's prologue is, then, a kind of key to unlocking what the fuller details of his gospel are about. It is important, then, how the prologue itself ends, for this indicates the climax of what is to follow. That climax is this: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1.18). The end toward which the

ministry of Jesus is oriented, and so the goal of faith itself, is this knowledge of God. Later in John's gospel we hear Jesus declare, 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him. …Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14.7-9). John is here walking the very fine line between the scriptural affirmation that no one has ever seen God and the confession that to have seen and known Jesus is to have come close enough to the heart of God.

Much more could be said about all this: about how Jesus is not the Father and yet to see Jesus is to see the Father, about how 'God' is a word more appropriate to the Father but which we still use for the Son and the Spirit, and so on. Yet this would take us in the direction of the highfalutin thinking which, perhaps a little unfairly, has given theology a bad name. The main point here is that we might see the difference it makes to understand the Creed to be leading in one direction or the other.

Among the many objections to the credal language are the masculinity of the word 'Father' and the link between the first article's reference to 'creation' and the creation stories of Genesis. Reading top down seems to place these as premises for all that follows. Reading the other way, however, turns these apparent premises into conclusions. Believing in God as Father becomes the end of faith – its goal – and not its premise. It is something into which we are slowly being ushered, not the point at which we begin to believe. Similarly, creation is no longer the 'coming-into-being' which has to occur before anything else can happen; it is now, also, a conclusion from what has preceded. We will come back to this in a moment.

We have considered a couple of times in these studies the emphasis with which we read the Creed and suggested that, with our modern minds, we often read the wrong emphases into the Creedal statements. Another way of recasting our reading would be to consider the volume (loudness) at which is it read: which are the loud bits, which are the bits at which our voice should be hushed, and where might we pause in silence? Where is the joyful confidence, and where the awe, an appropriate uncertainty? The con-fident bits – literally the 'believing-together' bits – occur under the article of the Spirit. Here is the promised shape of human life, beginning to be realised here and now: church, communion, reconciliation, restoration. Perhaps the 'ordinary' voice occurs in the ordinary history of Jesus – life as it happens to us and to him. And the quieter voice might be reserved for the first article, for here the end – *our* end – is revealed: knowledge of the heart of God. John's prologue, and his whole gospel, declare that this is the gift of the Gospel, but it is an *awesome* gift, an otherwise incomprehensible one.

Again, this risks becoming a wandering off into neat theological speak, if we remain only with the language of Father, Son and Spirit, which is why the dimension of creation is important here. If it is the case that the end of faith is the knowledge of the heart of God, then this knowledge is what realises for us our own true nature as creatures, as human beings. We are only properly ourselves when God is properly known as God or, in Paul's words, when our spirits cry 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8.15). The problematic word 'Father' serves now not to mark a masculinity in God but only to link our experience of God to that of Jesus, who used this word as name for the one who sent

In what way might the world not *yet* be 'creation' if God is not properly known?

him. And creation is now not the stuff which precedes any action – not a 'thing' – and neither now the action by which God gets the whole show on the road. Creation is now a *condition* or *state* of things: creation happens *to* stuff – to *us* – when we know God as Jesus knew God. Only the creature which is truly itself knows God as God is. The creature and the creator are related as left is to right, as up is to down. To say then, as John again declares, that the Word became flesh, that God and the human coincided in Jesus, is to say simply that Jesus knew God as we are promised we all will, and God knew Jesus back in the same way.

This brings us back to where we started in this study: to those who imagine that religion is about affirming the continuation of life after death or, to put it differently, that the only destiny towards which the church looks is mere resurrection. The assumption here is that what we otherwise live before we die is worthy of the description, 'Life'. Again it is John's gospel which sharpens the matter for us: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. This life is linked to our knowing the revealed heart of God, and this knowledge comes from our being 'in' Jesus as Jesus himself was 'in' the Father (John 17.21-23).

What *does* it mean truly to be alive, truly to be ourselves?

Has reflecting on the Creed 'backwards' helped you to engage with the notion of God as 'Father', and God as Trinity?

By the gift of the perfecting Spirit we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus the Son, that we might know God as Jesus did, and so become truly human, true creatures. We become, to shift from John's way of putting it to Paul's, the 'body' of Christ, not in the weaker sense of a multi-membered community which merely gathers *around* Jesus as a pioneer of our particular religious interests, but in the strong sense of *Christ's own body* – his very humanity – imperfectly but perceptibly realised as that strangest of cities: the church which believes all this.

How might such an understanding bear the fruit of human freedom?

The pay-off of all this theology is human freedom from fear of death in all its forms or, as Paul put it in the reading from Romans suggested for this study: adoption as children of this particular God. We confess a Creed which, undeniably, declares that death is not to be feared, for it does not have the final say. We confess, then, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. But the reason death does not need to be feared is not simply because we need the Creed to end there. The Creed has another end which we also confess: who has seen Jesus has seen the Father; who has seen Jesus has seen his, her end – adoption as a child of this God, who lifts us up, restores us, creates us.

It is because God is like this that we might begin to imagine that even death has lost its sting.

For further reflection

Consider the Scripture readings in the light of this material and your discussion.

Where are there contradictions between the Scripture and the study? Where do you find enhanced meaning of either the Scripture or the study?

Reflect on your response to the question or task at the beginning of the study. Would you respond differently after having read and considered the study?

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