

A Statement of Faith Presented to the
Committee On Ministry of the Presbytery of Mackinac
by
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Introduction

The Holy Scriptures are the primary source of the church's knowledge about God and are the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. In every generation, the followers of Christ have undertaken the work of reflecting on the scripture, tradition, and lived faith in order to voice their belief in God. The most widely recognized expressions are those we call our creeds. Such statements are not only attempts to summarize Christian belief, but like the ancient "rule of faith," they function to clarify difficulties, settle controversies, guide faith practices, and, importantly, inform our interpretation of scripture. To say that it is both a historical and theological necessity that the creeds of the church build upon earlier statements of faith is to state the obvious for a people who testify that God has entered history. As the church has articulated its faith anew in different times and cultures, the emphases articulated have also changed. One typical way to articulate a contemporary understanding of faith is through commentary upon an earlier accepted creed. By way of an introductory statement of faith, I will adopt such a convention and comment on *The Apostles' Creed*.

Article I

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

1. Whenever we speak of God, we do so knowing we will fail to reach our goal. Our utterances, even our wordless thoughts, could never grasp, distill, or comprehend the truth about God. But this is not to say that we cannot or should not speak of God. Rather, it is to affirm, at our outset, that God is beyond. God is beyond all that can be said in our thoughts, words, symbols, and metaphors. Our speaking about God, however admirable and truthful, therefore remains from the beginning, radically relativised by God's *beyondness*. This is what we mean when we confess God as Creator—that behind, beneath, before all things, God is.
2. To proclaim God as Creator is less to speak about the genesis of the world, and more to speak of that demarcation beyond which God lies. When we say God is creator of heaven and earth, we recognize that behind and under, before and all-through, God is. Yet, creation is a fundamental distinction. Everything that is—all that participates in time-space and/or in being—are creatures: angels and powers, humans and animals, plants and other organisms, rocks and minerals, the earth and moon, the heavens and earth. If we could come

to the end of all the creatures, of time and space, of energy and mass, of cosmic and quantum realms, of dreams and imagination, knowledge and art, we would come to the horizon of creation, not beyond. And, Beyond? God.

3. To confess that God the Creator of heaven and earth is also the Father almighty, is to recognize that we have come to know God through Jesus of Nazareth. It was the Son of God who taught us to pray to his Father. And he, the Son of God, evinced that we are God's children. To name God *the Father of our Lord Jesus* does not ascribe to God a gender or sex as if "father" was chosen over "mother." A creator is every bit mother as father—and need be neither. The name locates the revelation of God's identity as attached to the the person of Jesus. God, revealed as the Father of our Lord Jesus (and our Father, too), shows that God the creator-beyond, is personal and relational. When we confess God as the Father Almighty, we at once intimate that God is Trinity (existing in God's self as loving relationships between Father, Son, and Spirit), and imply the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth as God's Son. Further, when we confess God as "Father," we proclaim ourselves as children of God, claiming the Almighty Father's intention for personal relationship with each one of us.

Article II

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

4. When we confess, "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son...*" we acknowledge the unique identity of God known through Jesus. God's Triune identity is disclosed in created history through the person of Jesus Christ, who claimed the God of Israel as his Father and himself as God's Son. Jesus' divine sonship was shown as true when the Almighty Father raised Jesus from the dead. Raising Christ, God vindicates him and confirms Jesus' word about God: the God of Israel is Christ's father.

5. Confessing Jesus Christ as *our Lord* means acknowledging the unique place of Jesus as our master, our ruler, and our teacher in all things. Anointed by God with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel—the liberator of God's people. Professing Jesus Christ as our Lord, we recognize Christ's role in the kingdom of God. This reign inaugurated by Christ consists of all the people of God, among whom, through faith and by grace, we are included. Jesus is our liberator, having freed us and all of God's people from the power of sin, death, and the devil--which is the salvific victory accomplished by God in Christ Jesus.

6. When we confess Jesus, *conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary*, we recognize the dual natures of Christ's existence as fully human and fully divine. The Word of God takes on flesh in Jesus, who was conceived by God's Holy Spirit and born of Mary.

Incarnation is the *beyond-creator-God* revealing God's self as the *personal-relational-God* come to make atonement. When the eternal Word is enfleshed in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Creator crosses the horizon of creation. God establishes a new saving relationship from beyond and dwells among us full of grace and truth as Jesus of Nazareth. Born of Mary, Jesus of Nazareth is fully human.

7. Confessing that Jesus *suffered under Pontius Pilate*, we remember not only Jesus' human nature, but also the sinfulness of the world. Speaking the name of the one under whom Jesus suffered, we reinforce not only the historical specificity of God's work in Jesus, but also the personal complicity of individuals and the corporate sinfulness of the world. Our confession accords with the testimony of John, who wrote, "the world came into being through him, yet it did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." When we confess Christ's sufferings under Pilate, we identify ourselves with the sinful state of our world which results in suffering and death, and anticipate our liberation through the Christ who suffers.

8. As we confess that Jesus *was crucified, died, and was buried, he descended to the dead*, we narrate Jesus' radical opposition to the ways of sin and death in the world. Accepting the unjust sentence of crucifixion exposes the truth of a sinful and violent world. Christ's mutual love and abiding faith in the Father to set things right rebukes the worldly embrace of violence and retributive ways by which humankind seeks to set things right. By becoming as a common sinner, and experiencing the consequences of sin, God in Christ Jesus shows undeserved love to the world in solidarity with even the least of humanity. Death for Jesus was a necessity because of the nature of human sin. All sin ends in death--in dying, Christ is able to put an end to sin and its consequences. To proclaim that Christ *was buried and descended to the dead* is to confess that his death was indeed a true death--a death which presents the dubious condition in which the revelation of God's Triune identity and God's gift of salvation will be revealed.

9. We joyfully confess that *on the third day he rose again*. Doing so, we proclaim God's mighty love for the world shown in the resurrection of Christ Jesus. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the one who was dead--he who was in loving relationship with God--is made alive again. In resurrection, God's love overcomes the death of Jesus Christ and reveals the atonement for sin. This is an action of re-creation by the Creator God, who raised his servant Jesus from the dead. The Almighty God has vindicated his Son, Jesus, and has announced the reconciliation of all things.

10. To confess that Jesus *ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father* is to declare that the resurrected Christ continues to live in the presence of God. The Word of God, made flesh, has returned to God, having accomplished the saving work in Jesus Christ.

The ever-living Christ continues as Lord of the Church--where, in loving union with the Father, Christ unites creator and creature.

11. In hope, we profess that Christ *will come again to judge the living and the dead*. Here, we confidently place our hope and trust in Christ Jesus to be our judge and the judge of the whole world. Our hope is sure and solid, for the one we trust has chosen us by becoming human. For us and for our salvation, Christ died and rose again; he destroyed death, made atonement for our sins, and has freed us. Therefore, we joyfully confess our coming judgment, and continually call ourselves to repentance and conformity to God's will in our thought, word, and deed.

Article III

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

12. To confess that *I believe in the Holy Spirit* is to give voice to the third name in the Triune Identity of God. The Holy Spirit is God active in the creation of the world, God overshadowing Mary at Jesus' conception, and God in creative power raising Christ from the dead. Creative and personal, beyond and relational, the Holy Spirit is the dynamism of God's love. The Holy Spirit is *love-power* through whom the beyond-God creates. The Holy Spirit is *love-power* in whom the beyond-God crosses the threshold of creation. The Holy Spirit is the *love-power* through whom God relates to God's own self. And the Holy Spirit is the *love-power* in whom our personal relationship with God manifests in our lives. To say we believe in the Holy Spirit is to say we believe in the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, revealed in the saving work of Christ Jesus.

13. When we confess our belief in *the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*, we are proclaiming each as the ongoing work of God's Holy Spirit.

14. To profess belief in *the holy catholic church* is to confess that the Holy Spirit convicts, calls, gifts, and empowers the people of God to continue the mission of the God of Israel whose kingdom Jesus proclaimed, which has as its end the restoration of all things. To this end, the Holy Spirit has inspired the Holy Scriptures, through which we know the Word of God, and are given the sacraments, instituted by Christ Jesus, as effective means of grace for God's people in the Church.

15. To confess *the communion of saints* is to identify that the Holy Spirit unites all the children of God in personal relationship. As Jesus is one with the Father, so through the Holy Spirit we are one with Christ and with all who are in Christ. This radical solidarity of

the children of God--which extends across time and space--calls us continually to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

16. When we confess the *forgiveness of sins*, we call ourselves anew to repentance. Truly trusting the promise of God's forgiveness leads us to change our living to ever more reflect our calling as children of God, as we turn from the ways of sin, violence, and injustice. Believing in the forgiveness of sins means advancing the work of reconciliation of all things, in which we seek forgiveness from others and freely forgive. Proclaiming the forgiveness of sins is a joyful proclamation, for it is the resurrected Christ who has won our liberation from sin and death.

17. We confess *the resurrection of the body* with reference to Christ, and in hope for ourselves. When Jesus was raised from the the dead, his body was both like and unlike our own body. The *some-body* Jesus was before his death and the *new-body* Jesus is after his resurrection are in mysterious continuity, even though he was transformed in resurrection as divine love-power (re)created his body. Our confession professes our hope, then, that the *love-power* of God will re-create us, too.

18. When we confess our hope for *the life everlasting*, we are proclaiming our hope that, in love and power, God will enfold us into the very divine life of God. The life everlasting is an existence beyond what we now know--the new creation. The life everlasting is our hope of eternal communion with the Almighty Father, for which Jesus has redeemed us as God's children, and into which the Holy Spirit will re-create us. Our belief in the everlasting life is a belief that we, as children of God, will be taken into the divine life of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.