

The Creed: What We Believe and Why It Matters

5. “...Who For Us ... Became
Human...”

Sunday, February 13, 2005
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.

Everyone is welcome!

**O God, who wonderfully created,
and yet more wonderfully restored,
the dignity of human nature:
Grant that we may share the divine
life of him who humbled himself to
share our humanity, your Son
Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns
with you, in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.**

**Book of Common Prayer
Collect of the Incarnation, p. 252**

THE CREED



WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE
AND WHY IT MATTERS

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

**The Creed. What
Christians Believe
and Why It
Matters, Luke
Timothy Johnson,
Doubleday, 2003,
ISBN 0-385-
50247-8**



JON ROU © EMORY UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY

Luke Timothy Johnson

- **former
Benedictine monk**
- **Robert W.
Woodruff
Professor of New
Testament at
Candler School of
Theology, Emory
University**

Introduction

- **For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:**
- **by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.**
- **For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;**
- **he suffered death and was buried.**

Introduction

Who For Us ... Became Human

- This is the heart of the Creed
 - The experience of this mystery caused pious Jews to proclaim belief in two powers in heaven.
 - This mystery located for early Christians the threshold between:
 - The Old Age and the New Age
 - The First Creation and the New Creation

Introduction

Who For Us ... Became Human

- The Creed cannot replace the richness of the accounts of Jesus' life found in the gospels.
- It does however provide a guide to the proper reading of the Gospels, reminding us which parts of the story are essential.

Introduction

Who For Us ... Became Human

- Note that in proclaiming these words of the Creed, we are *not* merely proclaiming something about the human story of Jesus that happened in the *past*, for **His resurrection, exaltation, and never-ending rule is part of the present story of every believer, and his return to judge is part of the future story of all humanity.** (p. 138)

For Us

- **For us** and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death and was buried.

For Us

All Humanity

- Traditional language: “for us men”
 - Original Greek however uses the gender inclusive *anthropos* (humanity), not *aner* (male).
 - All humanity – not just those proclaiming these words – is included.

For Us

A Prideful Delusion?

- What we proclaim may seem preposterous, narcissistic, and scandalous to nonbelievers.
- We are literally claiming that a God of unimaginable power and majesty took on the form of the human creatures who inhabit a tiny planet within a vast and grand universe, and entered into their history, *for the sake of those creatures*.
- Surely to think this is prideful and delusional.

For Us

A Proudful Delusion?

- However, what we proclaim is not really a cause to feel pride:
 - (1) The Creed does *not* say we are the only creatures God is saving.
 - (2) If we are reason God has entered into the world, it means we are the *problem* with the world.
 - In Romans 1:18-32 “**we are identified as the cause of the distortion of creation that God became human to repair.**” (p. 140).

For Us

A Prideful Delusion?

- (3) God does not bestow divine attention upon us because we deserve it. The Creed suggests that God bestows divine attention upon us because doing so reveals God as love.
 - *Apape*: term used for God's love.
 - Love that seeks the good of the other purely for the sake of the other.
 - **The phrase “for us men,” then, does not suggest that humans are so overwhelmingly important that God had to become human, but declares that the mystery of God is love. (p. 140)**

For Us

A Prideful Delusion?

- **The incarnation “for us men” reveals God to be a passionate and (by some measures) almost a careless lover, who is willing to hide or even lose himself in order to elevate the creatures made in his image to whom God is so oddly yet powerfully committed. (p. 141)**

**And For Our
Salvation**

- For us **and for our salvation** he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death and was buried.

And For Our Salvation

What is “Our Salvation”?

- What is “our salvation?” What kind of “savior” is needed to “save” us?
 - Is “salvation” correcting our mistaken ideas?
 - Then a teacher would be adequate to “save” us.
 - Is “salvation” fixing our unjust social structures?
 - Then a charismatic prophet would be adequate to “save” us.
- What did the early Christians mean by “our salvation”? And why did early Christians feel only **God** could provide that “salvation”?

And For Our Salvation

“Salvation” for Early Christians

- Early Christians experienced “salvation” as something that had changed human beings *now*.
 - It removed them *now* from the power of forces that could enslave them (sin, law, death).
 - It energized them *now* with God’s own authority / power / spirit.
- It was both:
 - A rescue and restoration from the forces oppressing them.
 - An elevation.

And For Our Salvation

“Salvation” for Early Christians

- God had fundamentally *transformed* the structures of existence.
- God’s work in creation was not yet done, but this transformation, this salvation they experienced *now* was the inauguration of God’s ultimate cosmic victory.

And For Our Salvation

External Signs of Salvation

- The External Signs of their Salvation:
 - **Freedom:**
 - They had been transferred from a negative condition to the positive condition.
 - They had gained positive capacities they formerly lacked.
 - **Free Speech or Boldness:**
 - They could confront opposition and danger with confidence and courage.

And For Our Salvation

States of Their Salvation

- Early Christians wrote of *states* in which they found themselves:
 - **Peace**
 - A state of harmony between people, and between people and God.
 - **Joy**
 - Not happiness, but a state of contentment, a sense of proportion, a sense of how things fit together, even in the midst of suffering and tribulation.

And For Our Salvation

Virtues of Their Salvation

- Early Christians claimed virtues of **faith**, **hope**, and **love** that arose from their salvation, that changed how they lived.

And For Our Salvation

Radically New

- Early Christians felt in their experience *now* of salvation that they were part of something *radically new*:
 - A *new* covenant.
 - A *new* life.
 - A *new* “creation.”
- The newness they claimed was not “brand new,” but a fundamental *transformation* of the old.

And For Our Salvation

Experience of Power

- Early Christians claimed an experience of authority / energy / power as part of their salvation.
 - *Outwardly* expressed in their:
 - Performance of “signs and wonders.”
 - Bold proclamation of the good news.
 - *Inwardly* expressed in their personal and communal spiritual transformations.
- They felt that God the creator was source of this power.

And For Our Salvation

Experience of Power

- Three phrases are repeatedly used in this early Christian experience of power:
 - 1. **Eternal life**
 - 2. **Forgiveness of sins**
 - 3. **Holy Spirit**

And For Our Salvation

Experience of Power: Eternal Life

■ “Eternal Life”

- Found in all the Gospels, Acts, Letters of Paul, first letter of John.
- Used to describe not only a future life, but also a share *now*, in some sense, in God’s own life, even as earthly existence continued.
- No human savior can provide a share in God’s own life: hence only God can “save” us.

And For Our Salvation

Experience of Power: Forgiveness of Sins

- **“Forgiveness of Sins”**
 - **“the removal by God of everything that prevents full reconciliation between God and humans.”** (p. 147)
 - No human can forgive our sins; only God can forgive our sins, and hence only God can “save” us.

And For Our Salvation

Experience of Power: Holy Spirit

■ “Holy Spirit”

- Early Christians called the *source* of the power they experienced the “**Holy Spirit:**”
- Not an impersonal force, but
- The “life-giving presence of the risen Lord.” (p. 148) **“Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba!, Father.’”** (Galatians 4:6)

And For Our Salvation

Summary: Salvation by God

- Salvation for the Early Christians:
 - A **rescue / restoration** from the power of sin and death, and
 - An **elevation** of ourselves to live life:
 - In freedom and boldness,
 - With peace and joy,
 - Manifesting faith, hope, and love,
 - Empowered by God's power, God's Spirit
 - As part of a transformed creation, as part of the inauguration of God's ultimate final cosmic victory.
- Only God could provide such a “salvation.”

And For Our Salvation

Our Sense Today of “Salvation”

- Today we have lost this robust view of the “good news” of salvation, because of:
 - 1. The failure of Christians **“to display the power and energy of the Holy Spirit within transformed persons and communities.”** (p. 150).
 - 2. The tendency to focus on the “sin” we have been rescued from, rather than how salvation has elevated us.

**He Came Down from
Heaven**

- For us and for our salvation **he came down from heaven:**
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death and was buried.

Down from Heaven

The Problem of Religious Language

- Descriptions like “**he came down from heaven,**” or “**he ascended to heaven,**” are **mythic language**: an acknowledgement that language anchored in spatial and temporal terms is inadequate to describe God.
- We can no longer live in a “three-decked” universe of heaven *above us*, earth *about us*, and Hades *below us*.

Down from Heaven

Language of Heaven and Earth

- The language here of “heaven” to “earth” expresses the change in condition from the divine realm to the realm of creation.
- **“Jesus is the one who breaks the boundary between creator and creation by entering as the Word “through whom all things were made” into the flesh, and then returning to God ([John] 1:3, 14; 13:1). (p. 153).**

Down from Heaven

Language of Heaven and Earth

- Other writers struggled to express this “continuity-within-discontinuity” in Jesus becoming human.
- The Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6-11:
Though he was in the form of God [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming in human likeness.

**He Was Incarnate By
the Holy Spirit and the
Virgin Mary and
Became Human**

- **For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:**
- **by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.**
- **For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;**
- **he suffered death and was buried.**

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

Two Difficulties

- Literal translation: “**And being made flesh out of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin, and becoming human.**”
- Two difficulties for modern readers:
 - 1. Apparent gender exclusivity.
 - 2. Born of a Virgin.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

Two Difficulties: Gender Exclusivity

- The Greek original uses the noun *anthropos* (“human being”) not *aner* (“male”).
- Original Greek said Jesus was not made *man*, but was made *human*.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

Two Difficulties: Virgin Birth

- Annunciation accounts in Matthew and Luke explicitly say Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph had sexual intercourse.
- Early Christians understood the New Testament as teaching Jesus' conception was literally a miraculous intervention by the Holy Spirit.
- Modern Roman Catholic theology has markedly extended the literal reading of the early Christians to the claim that Mary was a “perpetual” virgin.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

Two Difficulties: Virgin Birth

- A *literal* versus *symbolic* reading of the Virgin Birth has become a touchstone of “biblical” versus “progressive” Christianity.
 - “Biblical” Christianity: You *must* read it *literally* or you don’t believe the Bible is the “inspired word of God.”
 - “Progressive” Christianity: You *must* read it *symbolically* or you are an “unreasonable,” pre-Darwinian fanatic.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

Two Difficulties: Virgin Birth

- Dr. Johnson suggest both sides have become absurd:
 - The “perpetual virginity” of Mary ignores unambiguous references to Jesus’ brothers and sisters, and particularly the important leader of the early church in Jerusalem, James, “the brother of Jesus.”
 - The “progressive” Christians seem to reject God’s capacity to create a human person apart from sex, while accepting God’s capacity to create the universe out of nothing and to raise human beings from the dead.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

The Incarnation

- The reality is we cannot know for sure the precise biology of Jesus' conception – and it is not important that we know.
- What is important is that the incarnation of God's Son involved both divine and human powers.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

The Incarnation and the Holy Spirit

- The Spirit involved in the Incarnation of Jesus was the same Spirit of God:
 - That blew on the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2),
 - That stirred the prophets to ecstasy and speech (1 Sam 10:6, Ezek 37:1),
 - That came upon Jesus at his baptism,
 - That guided him in his ministry,
 - That poured out upon his followers after the Resurrection.

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

The Incarnation and the Holy Spirit

- The phrase “Holy Spirit” describes **“the effective presence and power of God among humans.”** (p. 158)
- To say **“God among us”** (Matt 1:23) is equivalent to saying **“out of the Holy Spirit”**

Incarnate by the Spirit and Mary

The Incarnation and Mary

- Mary locates Jesus' Incarnation among the common experience of humanity:
 - **“born of a women”** (Gal. 4:4)
 - Jesus had human genes, and carried the imprint of human evolution.

For Our Sake

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- **For our sake** he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death and was buried.

For Our Sake

- Jesus did not have to be crucified.
- He could have avoided confronting the powers of this world. He could have acted as the agent of those powers.
- Jesus accepted his execution as an act of solidarity with his fellow humans.
- This acceptance is another example of God's self-giving to us, of God existence as "one turned towards others," that is implicit in God's act of creation.

For Our Sake

- I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life for the sheep... for this reason, the father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again.
(John 1:11-18)

He Was Crucified

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake **he was crucified** under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death and was buried.

He Was Crucified

Crucifixion

- Jesus was executed as a criminal by crucifixion at the command of the Roman governor.
- A particularly cruel form of execution:
 - Combined the torture of the nails with slow asphyxiation.
- Reserved by Rome only for enemies or slaves.

He Was Crucified

The Curse of Crucifixion

- Jews considered anyone crucified to be under a curse from God:
 - Deuteronomy 21:23: **“Cursed be everyone who hangs upon a tree.”**
 - Such a person could not be a source of blessing.

He Was Crucified

The Curse of Crucifixion

- This accounts for the strange statements in Paul such as:
 - Christ **“became a curse for us”** (Gal. 5:15)
 - **“for our sake the one who did not know sin became sin.”** (2 Cor. 5:21)

Under Pontius Pilate

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified **under Pontius Pilate;**
- he suffered death and was buried.

Under Pontius Pilate

- This statement reminds us Jesus died a *legal* death *sanctioned by the powers of the world*.
- This reminder has two sharp “edges” for us to contemplate:
 - 1. Christians who have followed the pattern of Jesus’ life have frequently found themselves in conflict with the powers of this world, and frequently suffered and died as a consequence.

Under Pontius Pilate

- 2. When Christians:
 - Have used the power of the state to achieve their ends,
or
 - Have imitated the power of the state to achieve their
ends,
 - They have lost their identity and become oppressors of
others.

He Suffered

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- **he suffered** death and was buried.

He Suffered

The Importance of Jesus' Suffering

- The New Testament tells us Jesus suffered both in life and in death.
- Jesus' suffering is important to us because:
 - 1. It demonstrates his full embrace of our human condition and the extent of God's self-giving love.
 - 2. It reveals something important about the human condition and the nature of suffering.

He Suffered

The Nature of Human Suffering

- Suffering is neither all evil or all good.
- Suffering is the pain caused by change,
 - Which can diminish and oppress us, or enlarge and ennoble us;
 - Which can be evil, or good.
- Suffering is thus the consequence of being conscious creatures in a dynamic, changing world.
 - To avoid suffering would require us to live a shallow life, numb to the world around us.

He Suffered

The Nature of Human Suffering

- Jesus' suffering in life and death reveals something important about the human condition and the nature of suffering:
 - Through Jesus' suffering, our own human suffering has been *transfigured*.
 - **"...suffering is not that from which Jesus frees us, but that which Jesus has transfigured into a means for us to share in salvation. (p. 173).**

And Was Buried

- For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
- by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
- For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
- he suffered death **and was buried.**

And Was Buried

The Ultimate Sharing of the Human Condition

- That Jesus was buried, and remained in the tomb for several days, confirms the reality of his death.
- **“The ultimate expression of Jesus’ sharing the human condition, even to the depositing of the flesh in the soil like a seed.”** (p. 175. See John 12:24, 1 Cor. 15:35-41).

And Was Buried

Decent to Hades

- There is also a tradition that the burial symbolizes Jesus' descent into the realm that in ancient cosmologies was most removed from God's dwelling (Hebrew *Sheol*; Greek *Hades*), in order to free those most distant from the divine presence.
- This “descent”:
 - Shows God's desire of salvation for all.
 - Is part of God's cosmic victory, “**so that every tongue, even those ‘under the earth’ should proclaim that Jesus is Lord.**” (Phil 2:10).