

The Creed: What We Believe and Why It Matters

9. One Baptism ... And the Life of the World to Come

Sunday, March 13, 2005
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.
Everyone is welcome!

St. John in the Wilderness

O God, you led your ancient people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: Grant that we, who serve you now on earth, may come to the joy of that heavenly Jerusalem, where all tears are wiped away and where your saints for ever sing your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Book of Common Prayer, p. 290

THE CREED



WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE
AND WHY IT MATTERS

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**The Creed. What
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and Why It
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- **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**

One Baptism

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One Baptism

A Public Initiation

- How did we become a Christian?
 - Not by filling out a membership application.
 - Not by accumulating sufficient “credit” hours of being good.
 - Not by an internal self-realization.
- We became a Christian in a public initiation – a public bath
 - which was administered by other people;
 - in which we were sponsored by people who loved us enough to wish for us the gift of eternal life.

One Baptism

A Public Initiation

- The *public* nature of Christian baptism highlights our fundamental dependence on others.
- All of us, baptized Christians, are fundamentally dependent on each other by virtue of the one baptism we share.
 - Baptism makes us not only Children of God, but also ...
 - Baptism makes us “children” of the church = “children” of the people of God.

One Baptism

Symbolism of Baptism

- The rituals of baptism carry deep symbolism.
- The act of washing:
 - Purification and the Forgiveness of Sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 5:26)
 - Rebirth, regeneration, and resurrection (John 3:5-8; 1 Peter 1:3,23; Titus 3:5; Romans 6:1-11)
- The putting on of new clothes:
 - Taking on a new identity, created in the image of Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27; Colossians 3:10-11)

One Baptism

Symbolism of Baptism

- Use of lighted candles:
 - Illumination of the heart and mind by **“the glory of God shining on the face of Christ.”** (2 Corinthians 4:6)
- Tradition of Baptism on Easter Vigil:
 - Sharing with Jesus the passing from death to an old life to resurrection into new life.

One Baptism

Initiation into a Life of Growth

- Baptism is a public initiation into a new life of growth within the community of the people of God, a life that should be a continuing progression:
 - from slavery to freedom,
 - from fear to boldness,
 - from death to life,
 - from darkness to life,
 - from selfishness to general love.

One Baptism

One

- Baptism is “one:”
 - Echoes Paul in Ephesians 4:4-5: **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”** (NRSV)
 - Tells us something about the unity and catholicity (inclusiveness) of the church: only *one* baptism is necessary to become a *full* and *equal* member of the church.

One Baptism

One

- In antiquity and today, the human tendency has been to mark stages of growth and development with multiple “initiations,” which become marks of increasing status in the community.
- Paul fought this tendency (Galatians Chapter 5 and 6; Colossians Chapter 2), insisting over and over that the one baptism alone was sufficient for the Holy Spirit to be abundantly and powerfully present.

One Baptism

One

- Dr. Johnson notes that the human tendency to provide marks of growth and status did, in the end, overtake Christianity (Confirmation, Ordination...)
- Nonetheless the church has not forgotten the insight that all the faithful – bishop, priest, layperson – are fundamentally equal within the church by virtue of sharing the “one” baptism.

One Baptism

One

- When we confess “one baptism,” we are declaring that *all the baptized*:
 - are *equal* in the eyes of God, and
 - are *equally responsible* for the church community and the body of Christ,
 - are *equally responsible* to God.

For the Forgiveness of Sins

- 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

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Purpose and Result

- We acknowledge one baptism **for the forgiveness of sins.**
- This phrase implies that the **purpose** as well as the **result** of baptism is the **forgiveness of sins:**
 - Baptism is given for the *purpose* of forgiving sins, and *results* in:
 - The forgiveness of our own sins.
 - The practice of forgiving the sins of others.

For the Forgiveness of Sins Grounded in the New Testament

- The connection between **baptism** and the **forgiveness of sins** is thoroughly grounded in the New Testament.
- John the Baptist offers baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4, Luke 1:77, 3:3)
- Jesus proclaims in numerous places that the Good News is through the forgiveness of sins.

For the Forgiveness of Sins Grounded in the New Testament

- Peter in Acts 2:38: **“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the Holy Spirit.”** (NRSV)
- Ananias tells Paul after Paul’s encounter with Jesus **“And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.”** (NRSV)

For the Forgiveness of Sins Grounded in the New Testament

- Paul in several of his letters connects baptism with the forgiveness of sins:
 - Romans 6:1—8:3
 - 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
 - Ephesians 5:25-27

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Sin

- Many in the modern world have abandoned the concept of personal sin. They excuse what was called “sin” in the past as:
 - A sickness in us due to bad genes, or unhealthy influences (people, stress, traumas). We need to heal, recover and assign blame.
 - A distortion in us caused by a lack of nurturing of ourselves. We need to forgive ourselves for misdirecting our energies and focus more on ourselves.

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Sin

- The message of the Good News of Jesus:
 - We are *more* than the result of bad evolution, inconsiderate or bad people, social pressures, stresses and traumas. We are *free creatures*, *significantly* responsible for:
 - Our own actions.
 - The harm we do to others.
 - We *all* need to repent, for we are *all* sinners, we are *all guilty* of sin.
 - Guilt: *not* a feeling, but a rational estimation of our responsibility.

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Sin

- We need:
 - The forgiveness of others, and
 - To forgive those who sin against us (“forgive us our sins, as we forgive the sins of others”).

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Forgiveness

- Forgiving another person for a sin against us is *not easy*.
- We often think we have forgiven, when all we have really done is:
 - Denied that we have been hurt by a sin against us (“I wasn’t really hurt”), or
 - Accommodated or acquiesced in the sin against us (“It wasn’t really a sin, / everyone does it, so I have no real justification to feel hurt.”)

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Forgiveness

- True forgiveness is to forgive the way God forgives.
- God knows us completely. God is able to see within us a self that is not defined by sin, and call upon us to become that potential self.

For the Forgiveness of Sins

Forgiveness

- To try to forgive the way God forgives, we must:
 - try to see, in those who have sinned against us, a self not defined by sin,
 - and try to call and nurture that self into being.
- Unlike God, we can never fully know another, so to forgive like God is an *ideal* we can strive for, but can never fully achieve.

**We Look For The
Resurrection of The
Dead, And The Life of
The World to Come**

- **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.**

The Life of the World To Come

Jewish Beliefs

- In Deuteronomy, the people of God expressed the conviction that God's faithfulness to Israel meant that fidelity to the law would lead to long life on the land.
- Yet this belief was dissonant with reality, for many died in witness to the Torah.
- In the face of such dissonance, a belief in a personal resurrection, and a life in a world to come, grew in Israel.
 - This represented a true deepening in the understanding of the people of God of the meaning of **God's faithfulness**.

The Life of the World To Come

Jewish Beliefs

- The earliest Scriptural witness to this belief is in 2 Maccabees.
- King Antiochus IV commands a Jewish mother and her seven sons to eat pork, in violation of Torah.
- They refuse.
- The king orders their torture and execution in front of their mother, from oldest to youngest.

The Life of the World To Come

Jewish Beliefs

- Each son expresses before their mother and the watching king their conviction of a personal resurrection and new life in a world to come:
 - The eldest tells the king: “... **you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws.**” (NRSV 2 Maccabees 7:9)

The Life of the World To Come

Jewish Beliefs

- The mother tells her sons as they face death: **“I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore, the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.”** (2 Maccabees 7:22-23 NRSV)

The Life of the World To Come

Jewish Beliefs

- At the time of Jesus, classical Judaism held that the one God of all creation was not limited by space and time, and would raise the faithful in a personal resurrection to new life.

The Life of the World To Come

Jesus

- In Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27, and Luke 20:27-36 (the “synoptic” Gospels), Jesus scorns the minority view of the Jewish Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The Life of the World To Come

Jesus

- In John 5:25-29, Jesus says:
- **“Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live ... for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”** (NRSV)

The Life of the World To Come

Acts of the Apostles and the Letters

- In defense speeches at his various trials, Paul witnesses to the “hope of Israel” which he says is the resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6, 24:15, 21, 26:25)
- Hebrews lists “the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment” as basic teachings.

The Life of the World To Come

Acts of the Apostles and the Letters

- Paul in his letters repeatedly connects Jesus' resurrection and enthronement with the present and future hope of the faithful. For example:
 - In 2 Timothy 2:11-12: **“If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.”** (NRSV)
 - In 1 Thessalonians 4:14: **“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.”** (NRSV)

The Life of the World To Come

Influence of the Enlightenment

- The Enlightenment (18th century Western intellectual movement) criticized the Christian hope of a personal resurrection and a life in a world to come, arguing that:
 - It cannot be verified historically, or through reason.
 - Therefore it was unhealthy wishful thinking, fantasy, generating:
 - Social fanaticism, when believed collectively,
 - Social passivity, when believed individually (“pie in the sky by and by”)

The Life of the World To Come

The Gamut of Christian Beliefs Today

- Reacting to Enlightenment criticism, Christian beliefs today of a personal resurrection and future life run a gamut from:
 - A Millenarian view that takes the Book of Revelation literally “at the level of a cosmic train schedule” (p. 290), ignoring the rest of Scripture, to:
 - An “Enlightened” view that Christian expectations are actually for future hope in *this* world through continued social, economic, and political progress.

The Life of the World To Come

The Gamut of Christian Beliefs Today

- Between these extremes are the vast majority of Christians, who at best have ideas of:
 - An afterlife in unknown realms called “hell” (feared) or “heaven” (a vague hope)
 - Future survival in some ghostlike form as a consequence of the immortality of a part of them called the “soul.”
- Dr. Johnson: Jesus’ retort to the Sadducees can be applied to all these positions:
- **“Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?”** (Mark 12:24 NRSV)

The Life of the World To Come

A Robust Sense of God as Creator

- All these positions represent a loss of a **robust sense of God as creator**.
- The affirmation we make in the beginning of the Creed:
 - God is the **all powerful creator** of the universe, “of all that is, seen and unseen.”
- We again affirm at the end of the Creed, by declaring:
 - God’s power to **create** includes the power to **transform** and **re-create** through bodily resurrection and the new world to come.

The Life of the World To Come

A Robust Sense of God as Creator

- There is an infinite distance between God the creator and God's creatures, even those made in God's image.
 - We do not know how God creates (Although the evidence of creation is all around us)
 - We do not know how God will raise the dead and lead us to eternal life (Although the evidence of resurrection can be found in our hearts)

The Life of the World To Come

A Robust Sense of God as Creator

- When some in Corinth ask Paul, **“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come.”** (1 Cor. 15:35 NRSV)
- Paul declares such questions foolish: just as we cannot determine the character of a tree knowing only the shape of the seed from which it arose, so too we cannot determine the character of our resurrected body from our present body.

The Life of the World To Come

The Christian Hope

- As Christians, we look forward to:
 - The full revelation of God's **power as creator**,
 - A full sharing, “as embodied creatures, and as God's people ... in God's own life that Jesus ‘the pioneer and perfecter of faith,’ has achieved (Heb 12:2)...” (p. 293).
- In particular:
 - “Just as God honored the human body through creation in the image of God and then through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, so God will honor the body through its glorification.” (p. 293)

The Life of the World To Come

The Christian Hope

- At present:
 - God's work in the world is incomplete.
 - The transformation of humanity and creation unfinished.
 - We each still face death, judgment, and resurrection.

The Life of the World To Come

The Christian Hope

- Our belief:
 - in the power of God to create, transform, and re-create,
 - In God's desire to share the fullness of God's own life with us as embodied creatures,
- Allows us in this world to “gladly dispose of ourselves with a generosity that the crabbed and narrow calculus of self-interest can never imagine.” (p. 294)

The Life of the World To Come

The Christian Hope

- Empowered by hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, we can generously dispose of our embodied selves and:
 - Engage the structures of this world and try to transform them towards the new creation.
 - Honor the “body” of the earth and its creatures by not pillaging creation.
 - Honor the body of Others by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned...

The Life of the World To Come

The Christian Hope

- “The present moment – the only moment in which we can act – is not a period of emptiness before the final act. The present is a time of transformation of our selves and of our world, which God is accomplishing in and through our mortal bodies even now.” (p. 295)