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The Missionary God in the Apostles' Creed: How Did the Apostles' Creed Portray a Missionary God?

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Introduction

The Word of God, the Bible from the beginning to the end, describes God as the Creator of the World, who created everything out of nothing “*ex nihilo*.” “. . . God is the primary and fundamental reality with reference to which all of creation is oriented and understood.”¹ Likewise, the heaven and earth, and all creations in heaven and earth, silently and “eco-vocally” declare God the Creator, God Almighty, God the Father of all, and Redeemer of all, good and just. Creation echoes God’s indescribable attributes, showing how His implicit and explicit fingerprints are over everything and declaring God’s presence and His might. Thus, creation and its multifaceted ecosystem undeniably pronounces God’s presence, beauty, and His love for His creation.

Moreover, God’s particular description of the creation of humankind – making man with His hands from the dust, breathing His own breath into humankind, sharing with them His own image (the image of God), and making them after His likeness (Gen 1:26-31) – declares God’s unconditional love and honor to humankind. Similarly, God’s fellowship and conversing with humankind, and their delegation to vice regency depicts God’s intimacy and purpose with humankind and His loving nature. God loved and honored humankind, imprinting His own image on them so that they could reflect upon His image and likeness. Also, God crowned man as co-



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governor and steward of His creation. Man, however, came to doubt God's word and defy His Lordship. Man disobeyed, broke God's covenant, fell in transgression and lost his covenant communion with God. The fall marred the image of God, subjected man to death and began a rebellion against God, enmity with each other, and with creation. But a missionary God, who created man with His own image and likeness did not abandon the man but continued His mission to rescue the man. God followed after man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). This indicates God's loving and caring nature. Additionally, God promised to redeem humankind and to crush the head of the serpent through the offspring of Eve, restoring the original fellowship through the atoning death of His Son (Gen 3:15). God sharing His image, following the man after the fall, and promising redemption reveals God's missionary nature and His mission actions to restore the broken fellowship with His creation, humankind.

Moreover, the Word of God, which described God as the creator, similarly described God as the redeemer and described His missionary intent and actions since the fall of Adam. As Wright affirmed: "Mission is what the Bible is all about."² In the Old Testament, God's missionary nature is clearly revealed by His promise to Adam, by His calling, covenantal promise to Abraham, and by sending Abraham as the source of blessings to the all nations of the earth, (Gen 12:1-3). Also, God continued His promise to Abraham's descendants and chose Abraham's children, the children of Israel, to be a priestly kingdom, (Ex 19:6). This means that those given dominion in the earthly realm also have a mediating/priestly role in the vertical relationship. The exodus of Israel from Egypt is a foretaste of the forthcoming redemption through Jesus Christ, and is evidence of God's love and His mighty hand to redeem His people from sin and the hand of Satan. Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery and from the grasp of their various enemies by the mighty hand of God was an echo of God's missionary nature and action.

Likewise, the Old Testament prophecy which declared God's master plan of redemption through the Messiah and the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ, also revealed the missionary nature of God.

Jesus' atoning death and resurrection for the transgression of mankind was also the basis for God's missionary task of restoring human righteousness and life. It also vindicated His messiahship, revealing Jesus' missionary nature as the one who was sent and who is the sender. Correspondingly, the Great Commission which Jesus gave to His disciples and to the church declared His missionary objective and its scope to redeem all nations (Mt 28:18-20). Also, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from God the Father and Son was sent to teach and walk alongside the church, giving her the power for missionary endeavors and once again confirming God's missionary nature. Thus, the Bible obviously describes the Triune God as a missionary God and describes

mission as His mission (*missio-Dei*) to redeem the mankind and to restore the creation to His original intent.

Next to the Bible are the ecumenical creeds which are reflections and summaries of the Bible, and church tradition succinctly summarized as the revelation of Himself given by the Triune God. God's attributes and redemptive work stated in these creeds also echo God's missionary nature and actions. In particular, the Apostles' Creed, which is the foremost ancient and Trinitarian creed and model for all ecumenical creeds, explicitly and implicitly describes the Triune God as creator, redeemer, and re-creator of His creation through His son Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit who was sent to sustain and walk alongside the church. Dorothy Sayers presented the creeds as "the greatest drama ever staged" and described how the plot pivots upon a single character.

The creeds open the drama with God creating the heaven and earth, move to a focus on Christ's surprising and tragic death followed with His unexpected resurrection, and conclude with the Spirit's breathing new life into creation with the resurrection of the body. In this they provide something of an outline of the Scriptures that stretches from creation in Genesis 1, runs through the gospel, and conclude with the new creation of Revelation 21.³

Thus, the creed answers the question who Triune God is and depicts His missionary nature. Similarly, the definitive substance of the creed may be summarized as follows,

The "creed of the Apostles" speaks simply and straightforwardly about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and focuses on their activity within the world (*opera ad extra*). So, the Father is identified by His work of creation; the Son is identified by His incarnation, death and resurrection; and the Spirit is confessed alongside the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and life everlasting. Within the Creed's framework there is a movement from creation through redemption to the consummation of all things.⁴

The framework of the creeds shows us that God is a missionary from the very beginning and the creator of missionary actions is revealed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Thus, this article will attempt to understand more fully God's missionary nature and actions in the creed, and how the Apostles' Creed depicts the missionary God. It will examine the Apostles' Creed in general, its historical background and usage in the Christian history, and how it has portrayed the missionary God in general. Second, it

will try to briefly introduce the nature of the missionary God as it is found in each article of the Creed, as well as the church's missionary role throughout the world.

The Missionary God in the Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the most ancient creed of the three ecumenical creeds, which "was formulated over a period of five centuries (between the third and eighth centuries)."⁵ It is the oldest creed, but always fresh and relevant for each age. Arand affirms, it is "at the same time the church's oldest creed and newest creed."⁶ It defines what Christianity is and answers in whom and in what Christians are believing, defining the boundaries of Christianity and describing what early Christians confessed.⁷ It is ecumenical; it serves the body of Christ across denominational and geographic boundaries as a yardstick for true Christianity and as a mouthpiece for true Christians. It succinctly articulates the Triune God, and God's attributes and actions: As the Father almighty, and the creator, "its opening declaration posits the equation, 'God' = 'the Father' = 'the Almighty' = 'the Creator of heaven and earth.'"⁸ This familiar term portrays God as the Father of His Son Jesus Christ from eternity, and the Father of all creation in heaven and on earth. Thus, the word 'God' does not refer to an abstract divine being, but to a concrete person within the narrative. 'God' is simply identified with the Father and confessed, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty".⁹

Equally, this Father God is depicted as a conversant God – communicating with His creatures and His image-bearer, man – and as the loving father, the redeemer of mankind and His creation. He is presented as the sender of His only Son, who was made incarnate and sent to accomplish His divine agenda. Further, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit helper and sustainer of His church in order to fulfill the Great Commission and prepare the church as a bride for her bridegroom Jesus Christ. Also, the clear purpose of the creation of the church, and the blood-sealed unity of saints with God and each other has a missional goal. It indicates God's goal to unite all things in Jesus, things in heaven and things on earth at the fullness of time (Eph 1:10).

Moreover, confessing the forgiveness of sin involves the responsibility to proclaim this great good news for those who are still feel guilt, shame, fear, and every other symptom of their sinful condition and who are crying out from the burden of their sin.

Moreover, this fatherly image contains a deeper meaning which alludes to God's missionary nature. First, the fatherly image indicates the sovereign authority of God over His creation and the natural relationship between God and creation, and particular between God and mankind. Second, it indicates God's fatherly divine purpose and

fatherly compassion for man. Third, it reveals God's missionary heart as a father who wants to restore the broken relationship between Himself and His children, between humankind and creation, and His intention as a father to bless His children with His divine goodness, mercy, grace, and to give His kingdom to His children as their inheritance.

Furthermore, God's missionary nature is revealed in the Apostles' Creed by the sending His only Son Jesus Christ as a missionary in order for mankind to know Him as their Father and for Him to bestow His grace on His creation through Jesus' death and resurrection. "The New Testament sees Jesus as central to that self-revelatory dimension of God's mission."¹⁰ Jesus, God's only Son and incarnated God, made God known to us (Jn 1:18) and through the coming of Jesus, God's ultimate plan for the humankind has perfectly unfolded.

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Also, the Apostles' Creed stated who Jesus is, His incarnation and birth, His atoning death and resurrection, His ascension, His position at the right hand of God, and the hope of His second coming. This confession, which depicts who Jesus is and His work for our redemption, also echoes His missionary nature and depicts Him as the one who is in the right hand of God and who intercedes for those not yet understand His redemptive work.

Similarly, the Apostles' Creed confesses the Holy Spirit including the belief in the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. This statement includes the promise and the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is missional. His presence on the earth and work in the church affirms God's missionary work through all generations until the fullness of time.

Finally, the Apostles' Creed reveals the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. The church, which was mandated in order to demonstrate God's presence among the people, is created to carry out God's mission. Also, the establishment of the church shows God's missionary nature and intent, "the *missio Dei* institutes the *missio ecclesiae*."¹¹ Also, the purpose of the communion of saints with God and with each other is missional, as the aroma of this communion invites others who are not yet in communion to join this fellowship of believers. Likewise, as the church confesses the forgiveness of sins, they are acknowledging the missionary nature of God and the responsibility to carry on His mission. Confessing the forgiveness of sin involves the

responsibility to proclaim this great good news for those who are still feel guilt, shame, fear, and every other symptom of their sinful condition and who are crying out from the burden of their sin.

The third article's final phrase, which confesses the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, provides the ultimate hope given to the confessors by the death and resurrection of Christ. This confession also gives the church the confidence to proclaim the gospel, guaranteeing that believers and confessors of the Christian faith will have the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting after this earthly life. This confession of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting especially comprises the essence of Christianity. It answers why Christianity is unique and why Christians are sent to preach the gospel. Also, it authenticates the missional motive beyond religious practice and expansion and transcends the Christian belief from the earthly life and motive. This statement puts the authenticity of other religions under examination. It gives Christians the guarantee and confidence to preach the gospel, as this message surpasses temporal concerns and grants them hope for everlasting life after death. Therefore, the Apostles' Creed's confession, both in general and in each of its articles, sentences, and phrases, declares the missionary nature of God and the missionary responsibility of the church and the confessors.

The First Article and God's Missionary Nature

The first article confesses, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." In confessing God as the Father, as Almighty, and as Creator of heaven and earth, this article shows both a doctrinal and a missionary intent. As a doctrine, the article answers in whom one believes, who is God, and why one confesses Him as God.

"The confession that God is the almighty creator of heaven and earth sets the stage for everything that follows. It defines what makes God God. It locates the definition and identity of God within a narrative: God is the one who created everything that exists. If one did not create all that exists, then that person is not God—period!"¹²

In this first article, God's missionary nature and intent are described in each phrase, representing God as the God who is to be believed, as a Father Almighty, and as a Creator of heaven and earth. Hence, His missionary nature and intent are drawn from His being God, from His being a Father Almighty, Father of all creation and the Almighty one who redeemed and rescued His creation, the one who has sole-ownership and the right to redeem and re-create the world.

The Missionary God in the Second Article

The second article confesses the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity, saying, "I believe In Jesus Christ, His 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." The birth of Jesus proclaims the fulfillment of God's promise given to Adam and Eve, the Old Testament Patriarchs, and Israel. Also, it echoes the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophecy and arrival of God's redemptive work which frees mankind from the burden of sin and guilt, which are greater bonds than slavery in Egypt and the oppression of any other earthly forces. Thus, Jesus's incarnation is the fulfillment and climax of God's missionary promise in the Old Testament and the commencement of the new missionary endeavors, which extend to all the nations.

The second article also declares Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, and ascension. Through His obedience, suffering, and death, God punished Adam's disobedience and its outcome of sin and death which created barriers between God and Adam, extending those divides to all generations of humanity. Jesus' suffering and death for the sake of mankind lifted God's wrath from mankind and satisfied God, fulfilling His promise and accomplishing God's redemptive act (Is 53). Thus, Jesus Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and atoning death for every sinner fulfilled the prophecy and assured the reconciliation of God with His creature, man. Jesus Christ has completed the redemption of the whole world. In Christ, the wall of sin that separates sinful humankind from the holy God have been dismantled. The incarnated Christ, who became sin for the sake of humankind, who died an atoning death for every sinner and victoriously rose again from the dead, fulfilled God's holy demands and reconciled humankind with God. In Jesus the whole world has been declared "not guilty" for their sin. Now, through the gospel, God issues the wonderful invitation to all people, 'Believe this good news and be reconciled.'¹³

Furthermore, the confession declares Jesus's resurrection from the dead, "The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty." Jesus's resurrection vindicated His divinity, authenticating who He was and His authority in heaven and on earth. In His resurrection authority, the missionary Jesus, launched the Great Commission, sending His disciples to fulfill His mission and to proclaim the Good News, the Gospel, to all mankind and up to the end of the world, and making disciples of all the nations. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And

behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20). Likewise, His ascension and sitting in the right hand of God declared His divinity and authority in heaven and earth. Also, His being seated at the right hand of God is a witness of His active role to intercede for the redemption of all the world. Thus, Jesus is a missionary who was incarnated to fulfill the mission of the Triune God and who inaugurated the new epoch by His birth, atoning death, and resurrection.

Finally, the second article’s last sentence looks forward to His second coming and consummation, saying, “From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.” Thus, the missionary God’s goal in the fullness of time is to unite all things in Jesus. The Lamb, who was slain will come again as judge with His divine authority culminating His missionary activity and uniting all things in heaven and things on earth under His authority.

Third Article and the Missionary God

The third article of the Apostles’ Creed confesses that “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.” It confesses who the Holy Spirit is and His missionary nature and actions which work through the holy Christian church and communion of saints. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, is also associated in this article with the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, as the Holy Spirit provides and confirms the forgiveness of sins and prepare saints for the resurrection of the body and for the life everlasting. So, the Holy Spirit is a missionary. He prepares the church for God’s mission and maintains the communion of saints for the missionary purpose. He forgives sinners and prepares them for the resurrection and life everlasting. Therefore, the ultimate goal of mission is preparing the saints for the life everlasting.

The third article also confesses the holy Christian church, which was inaugurated on the historic Pentecost Day by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and communion of converted people when they heard the sermon of the Apostles. The church was inaugurated based on the promise of Jesus, “. . . I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). The church is established to carry out the Great Commission, to announce the mercy and goodness of God, to snatch generations from the gate of hell, and to proclaim God’s redemptive plan for mankind and restoration of creation.

Furthermore, the church is the assembly of all believers, where the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are purely administered according to the Word of God. “Therefore, in accordance with the Scripture we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of

Christ and have the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ Thus, the church—the mother of all saints—is missionary by her very nature.

The church was inaugurated to uphold God’s mission and established to last until the end of the world. Thus, the mission is her identity and primary responsibility. She will be kept alive for mission and live for the mission given to her by the missionary God.

The third article also confesses the communion of saints. The communion of saints is a gift given to the children of God as people born from one God and has a missional implication. God’s children are called to be sent, the gospel which said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28) also commissioned us to go and preach the Good News to all nations (Mt 28:18-20, Mk 16:15). The purpose of the communion of the saints is missional. As they come together in communion, they will be dispatched to witness wherever they are: in their neighborhoods, in the workplace, and to the ends of the world.

Likewise, the third article confesses the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sin follows the gospel preaching and confession and absolution. This forgiveness of sin is granted for all the nations through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, as Paul said, “[E]veryone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then

Thus, confessing the forgiveness of sins is a reminder of our responsibility to carry out the gospel and to reach the unreached.

will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? (Rm 10:13-14). Confessing the forgiveness of sins reminds us of our responsibility to carry out the gospel and to reach the unreached. Whenever Christians who are a part of the body of Christ’s church confess the forgiveness of sins they are reminded of the forgiveness of their own sins. But even more so, they are reminded of their responsibility to share the gospel with those who are not yet acquainted with the good news of the forgiveness of sins through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Confessing the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is the hope which neither any scientific nor technological and earthly advancement can grant us. Only the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can give us this hope. This hope is also the driving force to partake in the missionary task and proclaim this good news for all the nations and for each person. Therefore, in the confession we see a missionary God and His mission which saves the whole world, the church, and God’s children.

Conclusion

The Apostles' Creed, which succinctly describe the Triune God, explicitly and implicitly describe Him as the Missionary God. This Creed introduces to us God the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, revealing the one who from the very beginning is missionary in nature, forming creation with a matchless love and mankind with His image and likeness. His missionary act was described when He breathed life into man, when He delegated humankind co-regent over His creation, and when He followed humankind after the fall with promised redemption.

Likewise, the Creed described Jesus Christ as the Son of God who was sent from heaven to the earth as a missionary; He came to accomplish God's eternal plan of salvation of mankind. He appeared as the one whose redemptive work is accomplished through His atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. Also, He is the one who gives us eschatological hope. His redemptive work unquestionably shows His missionary nature.

Similarly, the Creed described the Holy Spirit as the sustainer and accomplisher of the mission, as one who proceeds from the Father and the Son Jesus Christ, sent as a missionary to continue God's mission. He is the sustainer of the church, who equips God's children for God's mission. The Church is established and sent to carry God's mission. Likewise, confessing the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins have missional implications.

God's Word, which is the final authority for the rule of faith and teaching of the church, is also a searching Word. God sent His Word to the world to accomplish His divine will and to redeem sinners. When it is proclaimed based on the Scripture, as a primary discourse, when it openly discloses God's unconditional promise to the sinner, then it affirms God salvific promise to sinners.¹⁵ When the Word of God is humbly accepted, it brings God's salvation wisdom to sinners and equips saints for God's mission and "good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10).

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Endnotes

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² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 109.

³ Charles P. Arand, James Arne Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 51.

⁴ Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 65.

⁵ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 17.

⁶ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 17.

⁷ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 15.

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⁹ Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 66.

¹⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 29.

¹¹ Bosch and Burrows, *Transforming Mission*, 370.

¹² Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions*, 51–2.

¹³ Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 519.

¹⁴ Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *The Book of Concord*, 42, 178.

¹⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 2–4.