

The issues of life considered in the context of the Apostles' Creed

by Gerrit Dawson

“...From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead...”

John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes* that in The Apostles' Creed “the whole history of our faith is summed up...succinctly and in definite order, and that it contains nothing that is not vouched for by genuine testimonies of Scripture.” One source calls our attention to the personal nature of the Creed. It is not simply a “cold summary of doctrine”; it has the quality of a catechism, answering basic questions of what the Christian believes about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit, and about the Church. Furthermore, we have argued in this series that the Apostles' Creed is a concise way of showing that Christian Faith applies to the most pressing moral issues of life and death in our day.

The story of Jesus has everything to do with the value of the lives of the unborn, the very elderly, and the terminally ill. How Jesus values life, even diminished or unwanted life, determines how Christians also will regard other human beings.

What we do to the “least of these....”

From his days among us, we see that Jesus gathered the children in his arms to bless them. He received the touch of the sin-stained and called even a man as compromised and despised as Levi to be his disciple.

Jesus did not turn from suffering, either in the Garden or on the cross. He drank the cup given to him though he had the prerogative to call ten thousand angels to his relief.

One of his loveliest miracles was giving back an only son to his widowed mother by raising him from the dead.

When Jesus taught that what we do to the least of people we do to him, his own life of regard for the least gave his words undeniable authority. Every trajectory from the actions and teachings of Jesus leads to a compassionate regard for the most discardable of people, a regard that transforms but does not terminate their lives.

The implications of a fully human



“...his arrival to judge both living and dead means that we human beings are not the final arbiters of the meaning of our lives.”

Jesus

That was Jesus then. Is he the same now? Here is where the Apostle's Creed proves so helpful in offering an outline—the borders—of the continuing history of Jesus Christ.

Every story always hangs on its action words—the narrative moves along according to what is happening. There are eleven verbs in the section of the Apostle's Creed regarding the person of Jesus. Nine of those are past tense.

What has happened so far in the story? Jesus Christ the Father's only begotten Son, was conceived, born, suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. Then the same Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

The resurrected Jesus was continuous with the same man who had walked by Galilee and stood before

Pilate. Of course he was also discontinuous with the Jesus whom the disciples had followed. His body had been not really raised from death, i.e. restored to its same status as Lazarus or the widow's son. It was transformed and fitted for heaven. But the discontinuity never overrode the continuity.

Jesus was, and is, still fully human, still embodied. That is the man who ascended into heaven still inhabiting our flesh. The God-man ruling at the Father's right hand is the same Jesus who ate broiled fish and blessed little children.

This has enormous implications for us. Paul wrote, in a passage John Calvin loved to quote, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3: 20-21, ESV).

What we are is not what we will be

What Jesus is now is what we will become. Our lowly bodies will be transformed, be they as lowly as an embryo of just a few cells or a century year old carcass in which every part is nearly worn out.

We will receive a transformed, resurrection body outfitted for eternal

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life in heaven. This causes us to see the glory that potentially awaits every human being, no matter how disfigured that humanity may be in the present moment.

This promised glory is grounded and guaranteed in the person of Jesus. Thus, it inspires us not to denigrate the human-ity of others by ever hastening death or discarding their lives before they see the daylight world. Rather, we cherish each life from the beginning through to its appointed end, in the same spirit with which Jesus regarded others and endured his suffering.

We are not the final arbiters of the meaning of our lives

The Creed takes us ever farther. The history of Jesus is not complete. On Mt. Olivet, the angel told the disciples who had just witnessed Jesus' ascension, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go” (Acts 1: 11). We await a future act of Jesus. From heaven, he will return. His arrival back on this earth will be the judgment of those living and those who have already died. The promise of this return is

what gives weight and urgency to the present Lordship of Christ. That the God-man in heaven will revisit this earth causes John to be so bold as to identify Jesus as “the ruler of kings on earth” (Revelation 1: 5).

The imminent return of Jesus creates accountability to his Lordship. If he were not coming back, how, or even whether, we obey him would be only a matter of personal choice. But his arrival to judge both living and dead means that we human beings are not the final arbiters of the meaning of our lives. Our choices are not unbounded, nor are they without consequence. We are not the top of the evolutionary heap, with nothing higher than our collective will to govern us. There is a judge and there is a day when the judge will call for a reckoning. Ultimately, then, we do not belong to ourselves. We are not our own.

When human choice asserts itself against the will of God

Every abortion or act of euthanasia is an assertion of human choice over and against the will of God.

It is a taking of matters into our own hands, though often because

despair over present or potential suffering overwhelms us.

It is a flagging of faith in the future Christ has promised, though often because the body of Christ has not made this future vivid through our love for those in distress.

It represents a failure of imagination to see beyond the moment, though often because the church has not described brightly, compellingly the vision of Christ's return.

Called out and called to

The coming again of Jesus applies two kinds of pressure on the body of Christ. First, we are drawn upwards to see beyond this world of sin and suffering. We are called out to be like Jesus.

But the return of Christ also applies a downward pressure. We are sent back into the world as he was sent, as Jesus' own eyes, arms, hands and voice in the earth. We are sent to proclaim vividly the glorious future that demands now a life of faithful, sacrificial love even, especially, for the least and the lost.

Gerrit Dawson is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge, and a member of the PPL Board of Directors. He is author of Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation (London: T&T Clark Int'l; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 2004)