

# Christian Faith and the issues of life: Life issues considered in the context of the Apostles' Creed

by Terry Schlossberg

## *“I believe in the Holy Ghost”*

John Calvin wrote 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 abortion and to the other critical moral issues of life and death in our society today.

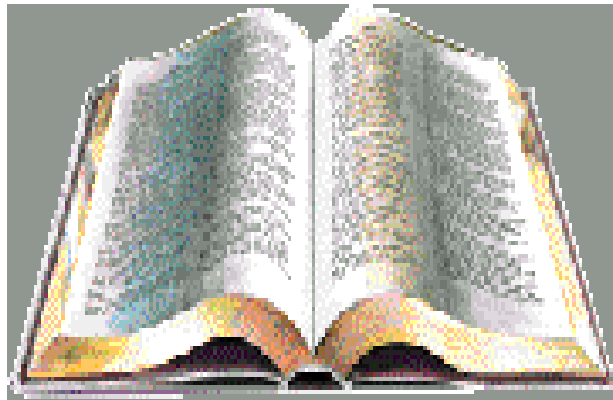
### **The Trinity completed: Prelude to the church**

The Creed has now moved to the third person of the Trinity. The Trinitarian structure of the Creed is completed. When the Heidelberg Catechism comes to this third part, it emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in believers' sanctification (*Book of Confessions*, 4.024). Karl Barth says that the whole of the Creed is about us (*The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*). It affirms God's work in and for us. It is a compact summary of God's action in the creation, the redemption, and the fitting of human beings for his kingdom.

The Apostles' Creed tells us nothing about the Holy Spirit. We must turn to other confessional documents. The Nicene Creed, for example, allows us to declare something about the Holy Spirit: He is “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.” (See also, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.051-.054)

There is a flow to this Creed that is similar to the Nicene. Christians speak of the three Persons of the Trinity, and even commonly refer to the “first,” “second,” or “third” person, following the Creeds' order. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book *The Creed*, draws our attention to the placement of the Holy Spirit in these creeds. It is no accident that the Spirit immediately precedes reference to the Church. He is the tie between the Son and his Church.

Karl Barth explains that the Holy Spirit is what makes the Church something other than another human institu-



tion. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Church Christ's own Bride, and empowers the Church to be the visible presence of Christ in the world.

### **The intimacy of God with the human race**

Our purpose here is not to be exhaustive of what can be known of the Holy Spirit, but rather to show how deeply involved with us he is and how important he is to the Church's life in Christ and to our thinking and actions on the issues of life and death.

Just as the Father made himself visible to us in his Son, so also the Father and the Son continue in relationship with us in the Holy Spirit. Jesus told us that he would be with us always, even to the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). Then he left and sat down at the right hand of God. This is a biblical paradox: Jesus gone, yet present.

But Jesus told us that unless he left, the Holy Spirit would not come. And then he promised a Spirit of God that would be more empowering than his own human presence. He would lead us into the Truth; he would convict the world of sin; he would enable believers to do more than Jesus did in his earthly walk (Cf John 14).

Yet the Holy Spirit was not sim-

ply a New Testament promise and his appearance did not only follow the departure of Jesus. John Calvin says that the Holy Spirit tended the “confused mass” that existed before Creation. The Spirit “everywhere diffused, sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and in earth...in transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life, and movement...” He has been from everlasting and will be to everlasting.

The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets. Here is an affirmation crucial to our belief in the veracity of Scripture on the one hand, and to our confidence that the Spirit is faithful to that Word in our day. Calvin names the Holy Spirit as the Author of Scripture. The Westminster Confession notes the necessity of the Spirit's inward illumination for us to gain a saving understanding of the Scripture, and affirms the completeness of Scripture in declaring “no new revelations of the Spirit (*Book of Confessions*, 6.006).” Calvin says we can judge spirits by their faithfulness to God's Word because the Holy Spirit “cannot vary or differ from himself.” This view of the relationship is constant in our confessions and is a hallmark of Reformed Faith.

Perhaps it is in the Confessions' teaching on “effectual calling” that we see most concisely and summarily the work of the Holy Spirit in saving us from ourselves. The Westminster (6.064f) says that God's Word and Spirit enlighten our minds to understand the things of God, renew our wills, set our commitments toward what is good, drawing us to Christ. By the power of this Holy Spirit living in us, we are “more and more quickened and

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# The Apostles' Creed and abortion

holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14)

The Holy Spirit is our Helper. John calls him the Paraclete, the one who walks beside us to help us all our lives long. He is the One who travels with us, guiding us into the truth when our own natures resist it; he is the One who enables us to choose the good when our own natures want to choose the course of least resistance; he is the One who forgives and restores us when we fail out of ignorance or even defiance, when we find in his grace the power to repent.

## The Lord and Giver of Life

We often speak of God as the Creator and Sustainer of life. This is not an abstract theological notion. The Scripture teaches that God not only was involved in Creation in Genesis 1, but also continues to be involved with his world. Couples who try and succeed or try and fail to conceive children are evidence that every human life is a gift from God. Scripture teaches that God is intimately involved in creating every new human life in his own image. Thomas Torrance reminds us that Jesus became one of us, not in the account of Luke 2, but rather in Luke 1 where the angel’s prophecy is fulfilled and Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost. If God withdraws his Spirit from us, we die. We are enlivened physically and spiritually only as a gift of God’s grace and through the work of his Spirit in us.

Each of us belongs first to God. The Holy Spirit is the Lord of life. To think we are our own is an idea contrary to our identity in Christ. We know better.

## The One who sanctifies us

There is an old Enlightenment idea that says, “Every day in every way we’re getting better and better.” There’s no basis in the natural world for believing that statement. But the Holy Spirit’s role in our lives, as the confession says, is to help us love sin less and less, and more and more desire to be obedient to God’s will (Cf *Book of Confessions* 6.075). We are not able to better ourselves in any way that has eternal significance. But the Holy Spirit is constantly at work in us with the goal of making us more like Christ. Scripture admonishes us to seek that daily renewal and progress toward becoming like Christ.

***“God’s Holy Spirit can enable us to believe and live so that no unborn baby’s life is threatened by what the Church says or does, so that those babies and their families are welcomed and cared for by the Church.”***

At the heart of the biblical idea is that we can know what is true and right, and we can do it. With the power of the Holy Spirit in us, we can overcome our natural aversion to doing the right thing instead of our own thing. John Calvin writes on this subject as if he has been watching us. He says in the *Institutes* that we humans rarely object to a moral principle if it is stated in general terms. The objections are made when the principle is applied to a particular case. “The adulterer will condemn adultery in general, but will privately flatter himself in his own adultery.” (II.II.23)

The Holy Spirit has a tough assignment in keeping us from falling, but he has the power to do it. The circumstances that seem overwhelming to us are not overwhelming to God. There is a biblical promise that God is working out his own good purposes in the lives of all those who love him. The long journey of Joseph in Genesis is a good biblical example of the rough road that promise of God can take and the tests of faith that accompany what God is doing in us. But he means to fit us for his kingdom.

Being fit will mean God’s Holy Spirit has enabled us to reject the idea or opportunity to abort a child. Or it means he has not left us broken in guilt and sorrow after abortion, but has forgiven and restored us, enlivened us, given us hope, and continued to work out his good purposes in us.

## The One who dwells in us—his temple

This biblical idea that God lives in us speaks not only to his power and presence alive in us, but also to our part of the

relationship. Calvin quotes Augustine:

*If we are bidden to make a temple for the Spirit out of wood and stone, because this honor is due to God alone, such a command would be a clear proof of the spirit’s divinity. Now, then, how much clearer is it that we ought not to make a temple for him, but ought ourselves to be that temple? And the apostle himself sometimes writes that ‘we are God’s temple’ [1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16], at other times, in the same sense, the temple of the Holy Spirit” [1 Cor. 6:19].*

Augustine is citing Paul. “Shun immorality,” Paul says. “Don’t you know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit—and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:18,19) His argument is that we have been purchased by Christ at the cost of his blood. His words ought to get our attention. They are among the most counter-cultural words of our time. They are exactly opposite the idea of autonomy. They tell us we are accountable to God for our bodies and the decisions we make about our bodies.

The Holy Spirit is not only the link between Christ and his Church. He also is the link between us and our unborn children. He is the One who creates and fashions those children. He is the same One who will help us avoid the deaths of those little ones. And he is the same One who will resurrect the lives of those who have fallen by taking the life of an unborn child or by encouraging someone else to do that. The whole Church today is in need of this resurrecting power.

Robert Munger wrote a little book called *My Heart, Christ’s Home*. The thrust of the book is to encourage believers to ask God’s indwelling Spirit to examine and clean up every aspect of our lives so that we become more fit vessels for his presence. God’s Holy Spirit can enable us to believe and live so that no unborn baby’s life is threatened by what the Church says or does, so that those babies and their families are welcomed and cared for by the Church.

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