

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

by Terry Schlossberg

"...He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty..."

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."¹ One source calls our attention to the personal nature of the Creed. It is not simply a "cold summary of doctrine";² 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 issue of our day: abortion.

The Creed shifts at this point from past to present tense

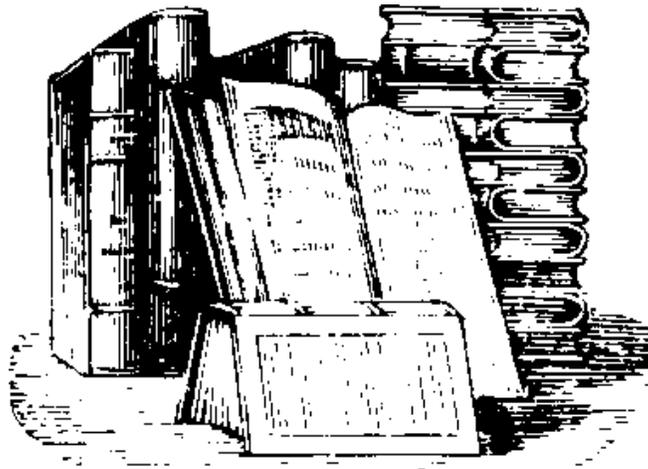
The Creed begins by leading us to profess belief in God the Father Almighty, and in his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus, we have seen, occupies the long center section of this ancient creed. What we have professed to believe up to this point refers to his life on earth as one of us.

Jesus' ascension marks a shift from past to present in the Creed: Jesus ascended and now "sits." While the Creed moves immediately to the future ("From thence he shall come...."), we are going to pause and consider this present condition of the Savior. He now sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Jesus is with us always...

Only Acts 1 records the ascension of Jesus. But Alastair McGrath points out that the ascension understanding is "found throughout the New Testament." Jesus is the Great High Priest who came to redeem us and returns to the Father, triumphant and with a name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9).³ This is the out-come for the One who humbled himself for our sakes, who endured the despise of us human beings and suffered death at our hands. This same humiliated human Jesus now reigns over all Creation. Both the suffering and the reigning are for our sakes.

With the Ascension Jesus begins to show his power and glory. Calvin says that here is the true inauguration of



Christ's Kingdom (Eph. 4:10). "Now his presence will be more useful to us." He has left but the Holy Spirit will come. We are not orphans. Here Calvin quotes Augustine that the Holy Spirit's presence with us is how Jesus fulfills his promise to be with us always.⁴

The Heidelberg Catechism says that "in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit, [Jesus] is never absent from us."⁵

...And he governs everything

We should note the repetition here of language about God. Jesus is at the right hand of the same God introduced to us in the beginning of the Creed: the "Father Almighty" (Maker of heaven and earth). The Almightyness of God is now bestowed on our Savior. This right hand sitting means that Christ was "invested with lordship over heaven and earth."⁶ He became and is governor of the whole universe—all of God's creation. God "has put all things in subjection under

his feet" (1 Cor. 15:27) and "has made him the head over all things for the church" (Eph. 1:22). The Church—the people of God—is the beneficiary of Christ's reign.

We, too, reign

Both Calvin and the Heidelberg point directly to the benefits of the Ascension to us believers. We are professing our own entry into the Kingdom, joined to our Head. In this clause we hear the promise of Jesus as our Intercessor with the Father, our way to God otherwise blocked by sin. And here we find ourselves showered with the spiritual riches of God: power, holiness, gifts, protection, and even rule over Christ's enemies and ours.⁷ This is heady stuff if we really comprehend it.

In the Ascension is Christ's triumph over despair

This is Christian Faith's triumphant response to an unbelieving world's despair. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15 that the Resurrection was a despair-shattering event. We are no longer in bondage to a fallen world. We are raised with Christ and we reign with Christ. Our Head resides at the right hand of God.

Jesus brings hope to every earthly circumstance

So, also, is this the response to the despair that so often characterizes abortion decisions. Doctors abandon hope that a baby who is not developing well in the womb can be helped. Too many people want to decide in advance that certain babies have no future, that they are better off not being

The Apostles' Creed...cont.

born because of the circumstances of their conceptions. Before they are born, they are judged to be too burdensome to be allowed to live.

And too many women resort to abortion out of a feeling of isolation. They feel abandoned by the fathers, by their parents, and even by the church.

This sense of despair and abandonment is exactly what is conquered in Jesus' ascension and reign at God's right hand. No one has to face a troubled situation alone and without hope. The promise of Jesus is that he himself is with those babies, and with us as well—to the end. Those who live out their profession of the Ascension in the tough decisions are those able to experience the active work of Christ's Spirit in their lives. They live in hope. And the response of Christ's body, the Church, can make that hope visible to them through acts of mercy and caring.

It is we in the Church who need to live in the confidence of Christ's power to save. We who are the body of Christ, connected to that reigning Head, can change the despair of abortion into life-giving hope.

Endnotes

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960), p. XXX
2. "A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism," *Landmarks, Teacher's Manual* (CRC Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), p.56.
3. Alister McGrath, "I Believe": *Exploring the Apostles' Creed*, InterVarsity Press (Downers Grove, IL, 1997), p. 74.
4. John Calvin, *The Institutes*, p. 523.
5. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 47, *The Book of Confessions* (PCUSA).
6. Calvin, *The Institutes*, p. 524-25.
7. See *The Institutes*, p. 524-25, and *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 51

This article is part of a continuing series. For previous articles, go to the **Topical Index** from a link found at the bottom of this issue's index page.

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

- *Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1.*