

THE CREED AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Marcel Sarot



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LOUVAIN MONOGRAPHS IN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

51

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by

Marcel Sarot

PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

2024

Cover illustration: Aad de Haas, "Kruisweg, XVI. Statie: Verrijzenis"
(H. Cunibertus, Wahlwiller).

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

© 2024, Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan 153, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

ISBN 978-90-429-5302-4
eISBN 978-90-429-5303-1
D/2024/0602/71

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Preface

In January 2023, I had the honor of delivering the Bishop Jonas Thaliath Endowment Lectures 2022–2023 at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK) Bangalore, India, on ‘The Creed and the Christian Life.’ My heartfelt thanks go to those responsible for the invitation and for making my stay at DVK a pleasure: Dr. Shaji George Kochuthara CMI, Dr. Jeff Shawn Jose CMI, Prof. Dr. Sebastian Mullopparambil CMI, Dr Joby Jose Kochumuttom CMI, Prof. Kurian Kachappilly CMI, Prof. Joy Philip Kakkanattu CMI, Dr Pratheesh Michael Pulickal CMI, and many others.

I had been working and lecturing on the Apostles’ Creed on and off for almost twenty years. It all began with an interview for the journal of a Christian student society called *Sola Scriptura* in 2004. Though I taught philosophy of religion at the time, I had always been quite open to the students about my Catholic faith. That triggered one of my students, Matthijs Geluk, to confront me for this interview with the Apostles’ Creed and ask me to comment on it off the cuff.¹ I tried to clarify what the articles of the Creed meant and why we need them. The idea behind that was that the Creed gives us the essentials of the Christian faith, so if we fail to believe any of the articles, our faith is no longer the same. Because I was unprepared for these questions, I was rather satisfied with my answers until I arrived at the descent into hell. I knew nothing better than to say that this confirmed the reality of the death of Jesus. That was not entirely satisfactory, however, because after having confessed the crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus, one needs no further assertion of his death. What does this article add? At the time, I did not have the answer.

As a result of this experience, I began to read and study the Apostles’ Creed, initially with the idea of finding answers to my own questions and thus deepening my own understanding of what I believe, then also with the idea of making my findings available to those interested in a Dutch monograph. When I moved to Tilburg University in 2012, I had a sizeable manuscript on the Creed on my computer. That came in useful since from then on, I had to teach an annual course on the Creed. My manuscript provided content and also grew as a result of teaching. Gradually, my take on The Creed changed. In my inaugural lecture at Tilburg University

¹ The interview was published as Matthijs Geluk, ‘Interview met dr. M. Sarot, gehouden 27 september 2004,’ *Ad Rem* 28/1b (2004), 13–17.

in 2013, for instance, I still explained the confession of the catholicity of the Church as the confession of a fact. By then I had noted that some interpreted it as a fact about the future rather than a fact about the present, thus interpreting the text eschatologically. Others interpreted some parts of the creed as expressing religious feelings and emotions or as rules of the faith rather than factual beliefs. None of these views entirely convinced me, however, since they failed to explain why, in the early church, confessing the Creed gave access to baptism and the eucharist. A textbook I used for my course on the Creed, *Believing Three Ways in One God* by the British theologian Nicholas Lash, finally helped me to understand this. According to Lash, we should understand the Creed on the analogy of a marriage vow: it is a commitment rather than a list of factual beliefs. This can easily be applied to what the Creed says about the Church: those who confess belief in a holy catholic Church do not primarily list a series of facts but commit themselves to making the Church holy and catholic. Unfortunately, Lash himself did not consistently apply his own interpretative principles in his book. As a result, it took me some time to see how the commissive aspect is a key to understanding large parts of the Creed.

The invitation to lecture at Dharmaram College came at the right time. It helped me to take the next step and to apply for the first time the interpretation of the Creed as primarily a commitment not to individual articles but to the Creed as a whole. After I had given the lectures, I was encouraged to publish them. In it, I try to offer an interpretation of the Creed that is both scholarly and devotional, an interpretation moreover that focuses primarily on what, in my eyes, is often neglected in other interpretations of the Creed: its being intended as primarily a commitment to God and the Christian life. This, it seems to me, is of the highest importance for understanding the relevance of the Christian faith for today. It is also, important, however, for a sound scholarly understanding of the Creed: reading it as merely a list of factual beliefs leads to a dead end. This does not mean that the Creed is not about factual belief at all; it only means that stating factual beliefs is not the heart of what we do when we confess the Creed. Some may think that my interpretation of the Creed is uneven and that I overemphasize the commitment aspect. I do not think that this is correct, but if this is the case, it is justified by the neglect of the aspect in other studies. May this work help many to get a better grasp of the Christian faith as it is presented and confessed in the Apostles' Creed!

This book is written from an insider perspective: by a Catholic for Catholics. When I write that the clause 'our Lord' is about Jesus' relation

‘to us,’ I mean: ‘to us, Catholics.’ I hope, of course, that this book will be read by many who are not Catholics. Other Christians will mostly be able to concur with the ‘we’ and ‘us.’ When I am aware of disagreements between Catholics and other Christians, I will explicitly discuss these; in the absence of such a discussion, I assume that non-Catholic Christians can endorse the interpretation I give. I have hesitated to use the insider perspective because some may feel excluded, and others may be critical of it from an academic point of view. That, despite these misgivings, I have chosen to adopt this perspective, has two reasons. Firstly, the alternative leads to laborious wordings: ‘to us’ would become ‘to the Catholics (and other Christians) confessing this Creed.’ Secondly, the insider perspective does more justice to the original setting of these lectures, which were given by a Catholic theologian to Catholic colleagues and students in a Catholic college. It is my sincere intention, however, that this book will be useful to ‘outsiders’ interested in a scholarly Catholic interpretation of the Apostles’ Creed just as much as to ‘insiders.’² The message of Jesus Christ is, by its nature, directed to all humanity, not just Catholics or Christians. In another way, this also applies to scholarly work: that is always directed at the wider community of scholars, not just to kindred spirits.

Apart from those mentioned above, I owe a debt of gratitude to many others: my students at Utrecht University, Tilburg University, and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram Bangalore, Prof. Willem van Asselt, Prof. Roel van den Broek, Prof. Vincent Brümmer, Prof. Peter Jonkers, Dr. Leo Mock, Dr. Sjoerd Mulder, Dr. Geo Pallikunel CMI, Prof. Henk Schoot, and Prof. Archibald van Wieringen.

Finally, during the writing of this book, I have, consciously and unconsciously, drawn on my previous work. In some cases, there is word-for-word overlap. I would like to thank the publishers of the following publications for their permission to re-use material from:

- Marcel Sarot, ‘Identiteit tussen verhaal en belijdenis: Over het belang van de Apostolische Geloofsbelijdenis voor christelijke identiteit en over een verhaal van Rufinus van Aquileja,’ in: Bob Becking & Annette Merz (eds.), *Verhaal als Identiteits-code: Opstellen aangeboden aan Geert Van Oyen bij zijn afscheid van de Universiteit Utrecht* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2008), 266–276;

² On the complementarity of insider perspective and outsider perspective, see our ‘Keeping Theology and Religious Studies Together,’ *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 76 (2022), 13–14.

- Marcel Sarot, 'Confessing the Catholicity of the Church,' *International Journal for Philosophy & Theology* 74/2 (2013), 154–168;
- Marcel Sarot, 'Believing in God the Father: Interpreting a Phrase from the Apostles' Creed,' *HTS Theological Studies* 72/4 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3278>;
- Marcel Sarot, 'Post-Mortem Conversion?' in: Stephan van Erp & Karim Schelkens (eds.), *Conversion and Church: The Challenge of Ecclesial Renewal* (Fs. Henk Witte) (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 43–54;
- Marcel Sarot, 'The Scope of Redemption: On Finding Meaning in Christ's Descent into Hell,' in: Marcel Sarot & Archibald van Wieringen (eds.), *The Apostles' Creed: 'He Descended into Hell'* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 185–206;
- Marcel Sarot, 'Een geloofsbelijdenis als een trouwbelofte: Het belang van Speech Act Theory voor de theologie,' *Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte* 112/4 (2020), 448–452, <https://doi.org/10.5117/ANTW2020.4.017.SARO>.

Marcel Sarot
Tilburg, The Netherlands, 13 December 2023

The Text of the Creed

The Apostles' Creed	Symbolum Apostolicum
I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.¹	Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae, et in Iesum Christum, Filius Eius unicum, Dominum nostrum, qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine, passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus, descendit ad inferos, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad caelos, sedet ad dexteram Patris omnipotentis, inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos. Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem, vitam aeternam. Amen.²

¹ Text taken from CCC. Unless otherwise mentioned, quotations from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed have been taken from the same place. The English text is not a literal translation of the Latin text in CCC. Especially striking are the insertion of 'the power of' in 'conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit' and the omission of the second occurrence of 'omnipotent.' The insertion of 'by the power of' betrays the influence of Luke 1:35 ('the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow') but is unnecessary; we will omit it from later quotations of the English translation. We will discuss the omission of the second occurrence of 'omnipotent' below in 6.1, 110.

² Text taken from CCC.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ACD	Ancient Christian Doctrine
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
attr.	attributed to
BCE	before the Christian/common era
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (Vatican website)
CCL	Corpus Christianorum series Latina
CE	Christian/common era
Cf.	<i>Confer</i> (= Compare)
CPT	Contributions to Philosophical Theology
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DH	Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünemann, & Helmut Hoping (eds.), <i>Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum</i> (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, ⁴² 2009).
DV	<i>Dei verbum</i>
ed(s).	editor(s), edition, edited
ESCW	Edward Schillebeeckx Collected Works
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English translation
FaCh	The Fathers of the Church; A New Translation founded by Ludwig Schopp
FKDG	Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte
IPM	Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LThK ³	Walter Kasper (ed.), <i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i> 3rd ed.
LXX	Septuagint
MedFr	The Medieval Franciscans
MS	Marcel Sarot
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NET	New English Translation (of the Bible)
NovTestSuppl.	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

NY	New York
OUP	Oxford University Press
par.	and parallel texts
PL	Migne, <i>Patrologia Latina</i>
quot.	quotation
rpt.	Reprint
RSVCE	Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>
SLAG	Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft
STh	<i>Summa theologiae</i>
STAR	Studies in Theology and Religion
transl.	translated (by), translation

The Relevance of the Creed for the Christian Life

1. Why the Apostles' Creed?

Creeds are summaries of the Christian faith; they articulate the core of faith. The oldest collection of documents on the Christian faith, the New Testament, is too long to count as a summary and much of what it contains does not belong to the core. Nor are the apocryphal writings that receive so much attention in our time, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas, concise summaries. Rather, they are attempts to outline an alternative Jesus image, which apparently competed with the (older) Biblical Jesus image in the early church and lost that competitive battle. While we can learn from this about the multiformity of early Christianity, it does not get us any closer to the core of the Christian faith.

Of course, we could try to craft a summary of the New Testament. But that would be *our own* summary, and others would again prefer other summaries. We avoid that if we use a summary that was already composed in the early church and has not lost its authority to this day. There are two such summaries: the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Since the Apostles' Creed is a Western Creed and only the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed has been accepted at an ecumenical council¹ and is therefore ecumenical (in the sense of universally accepted), there is much to be said for preferring this Creed.² Despite this, we will focus on the Apostles' Creed. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, antiquity is an important consideration. The Apostles' Creed in the form in which we have it dates from the eighth century, but the Old Roman Creed from which it was developed – and to which it still is very similar – can be traced back to the early third century. Nicholas Lash summarizes: 'What we have, then, in the Apostles' Creed, is a form

¹ It is likely that the text was accepted at the Council of Constantinople (381), the minutes of which have been lost. It is included in the acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451). See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Routledge, 9th impression 1999 of the 3rd ed. 1972), 296–331.

² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 296. The fact that these lectures on which this book is based were given in India, in a non-Western context, strengthens the case for the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

already “classical” in the fourth century which would, by the eighth, supersede all other Latin versions.³ Secondly, when we compare both Creeds the Apostles’ Creed is shorter and its language more straightforward than that of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It speaks more directly to the heart.

Thirdly, when we compare both Creeds, it appears that in the instances in which the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is longer, the additional text can be explained as a rejection of alternative interpretations of the faith, which were condemned as heresies.⁴ For example, the Apostles’ Creed has ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit.’ In contrast, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed has ‘We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son, he is worshipped and glorified.’ The additional text rejects the position of those who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the *pneumatomachoi*.⁵ Some thirty years before this additional text was accepted at the Council of Constantinople, Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 313–386) wrote: ‘for there is [...] One God, the Father; One Lord, his only-begotten Son; One Holy Ghost, the Comforter. And it is enough for us to know these things; but inquire not curiously into his nature or substance: for had it been written, we would have spoken of it; what is not written, let us not venture on; it is sufficient for our salvation to know, that there is Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.’⁶ The additional text, then, probes into mysteries about which Cyril would have liked to remain silent. That Cyril was not the only one to feel this way is shown by the following quote from Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 310–367):

The errors of heretics and blasphemers force us to deal with unlawful matters, to scale perilous heights, to speak unutterable words, to trespass on forbidden ground. Faith ought in silence to fulfil the commandments, worshipping the Father, reverencing with Him the Son, abounding in the Holy Ghost, but we must strain the poor resources of our language to express thoughts too great for words. The error of others compels us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart.⁷

³ Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God* (1992; rpt. London: SCM Press, 2002), 14.

⁴ It is important to recognize that at the time these ‘heresies’ emerged, they were genuine but inadequate attempts to articulate the Christian faith, and those who were doing so, were not aware of the fact that their positions would subsequently be rejected as heresies.

⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 338–344.

⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XVI 24.

⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* II 2.

Maurice Wiles mentions heresy as one of the major motives for the development of doctrine and claims: 'The influence of heresy on the early development of doctrine is so great that it is almost impossible to exaggerate it.'⁸ Given the fact that the additional texts in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed were elicited by heresies, we prefer to focus on the Apostles' Creed, which focuses rather on the positive kerygma of the early Church.

That the Apostles' Creed indeed summarizes the kerygma of the early Church is, fourthly, also shown by a legend on its origin that we find in Rufinus of Aquileia (†410). He relates that the tradition faithfully handed down how the Apostles' Creed came into being. After Jesus' ascension, the apostles on Pentecost received the gift of speaking different languages. Thus, equipped to preach the gospel, on the evening before they went out to spread the gospel all over the world, they set a standard for their preaching. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, each of them contributed one article to the Creed that became known as 'the Apostles' Creed.' From then on, one could distinguish true preachers of the gospel from false ones by asking them about the Apostles' Creed, Rufinus said.⁹ Later narrators even reveal which article each apostle contributed.¹⁰ Contemporary scholarship regards this story as a legend because one finds it neither in the New Testament nor elsewhere before Rufinus. There is no reason, by the way, to doubt that the story Rufinus tells derives from an older tradition and that he himself believed it.¹¹ This means that the linking of the Apostles' Creed to the Apostles has ancient credentials. The first time the Apostles' Creed is called 'apostolic' in the writings we have been handed down is in a letter from the Synod of Milan (ca. 389) to Pope Siricius, presumably written by Ambrose of Milan. There it is said that the Roman church always integrally transmitted the Apostles' Creed.¹²

⁸ Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967), 28–36, quot. 36.

⁹ Rufinus, *Commentarius in symbolum apostolorum* 2; *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* transl. & annot. by J.N.D. Kelly (London: Longmans: 1955), 29–31. Henri de Lubac, *The Christian Faith: An Essay on the Structure of the Apostles' Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 20–55, traces the history of this legend.

¹⁰ See Kelly in Rufinus, *Commentary*, 101. See also Markus Vinzent, *Der Ursprung des Apostolikums im Urteil der kritischen Forschung* (FKDG 89; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2006), 24–30.

¹¹ See Kelly's commentary in Rufinus, *Commentary*, 101.

¹² Ambrose, Letter 44 (42), to Pope Siricius, in: Saint Ambrose, *Letters* transl. by Sister Mary M. Beyenka (FaCh 26; Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 1967), 227.

When the church today still calls the Apostles' Creed 'apostolic,' it is aware of the fact that this is not a claim about its exact historical provenance but about its content. The Apostles' Creed is a reliable summary of the apostles' preaching.¹³ In the words of Nicholas Lash: 'What the Scriptures say at length, the Creed says briefly.'¹⁴

Fifthly, further comparison of the Apostles' Creed with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed shows that, even though the Apostles' Creed has never been formally accepted by the Eastern Church, none of its content is unacceptable to the Eastern Churches.¹⁵ Apart from the places in which the Apostles' Creed is shorter, there are only three major differences: the Apostles' Creed is in the first person singular ('I believe'), whereas the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is written in the first person plural ('We believe'). Secondly, the longer Creed omits the descent to the dead. And thirdly, the longer Creed omits the communion of saints, or rather, replaces it with a reference to the one baptism.

As to the first difference, it reflects a difference in origin. While the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was proclaimed by the council fathers at an ecumenical council, the Apostles' Creed probably had its origin in the baptismal creed of the Christian community in early third-century Rome.¹⁶ Understandably, the 150 council fathers proclaimed their faith in the first person plural, whereas a baptizand has to confess his or her faith in the first person singular.¹⁷ This implies that the Apostles' Creed is primarily a liturgical text, not a dogmatic text.¹⁸ By the way, the fact that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was proclaimed at an

¹³ See Kelly in Rufinus, *Commentary*, 101. See also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* V 12; Ambrose of Milan, *Explanatio symboli* 3; De Lubac, *Christian Faith*, 51–53.

¹⁴ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 8.

¹⁵ This conclusion is also drawn by Gerald L. Bray in the Introduction to his edited volume *We Believe in One God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), xxvii. The reasons for the Eastern rejection of the Apostles' Creed were formal rather than material: originally, the Apostles' Creed was a local Creed, and, as argued by the orthodox part at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1445), its apostolic origin is doubtful. See Dorothea Sattler, 'Apostolisches Glaubensbekenntnis,' in: LThK³ Vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 879.

¹⁶ See Liuwe Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (IPM 43; Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 15–72.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* Vol. 1 (1951; rpt. Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1986), 463.

¹⁸ Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 43. Westra even goes so far as to question its inclusion in DH. See *stelling 1* in the dissertation-edition of his book (which is otherwise identical with the commercial edition). See also Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (1991; 3rd impr. 2010 of new ed. 2002), 3.

ecumenical council means that it can legitimately be interpreted as a dogmatic text. Still, it does not mean that it is not a liturgical text. On the one hand, it functions as a liturgical text in the Holy Eucharist up to the present day,¹⁹ and on the other, also this text may have a liturgical origin. Contemporary scholarship often assumes that in origin, also this text is a local liturgical creed that was subsequently adopted (and perhaps adapted) by the Council of Constantinople (381).²⁰

The second major difference between the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is the inclusion of the descent to the dead and the first in contrast to its omission in the second. This is rather paradoxical: it is the Western Creed that has the clause, while in the liturgical celebrations of the Eastern Church the doctrine of the descent into hell is more prominent than in those of the Western Church. In this connection, Gerard Rouwhorst speaks of 'a curious discrepancy between liturgical tradition and the creed.'²¹ The prominence of this theme in Eastern liturgy, however, makes clear that when the Apostles' Creed proclaims faith in the descent to the dead, it does not proclaim a distinctively Western belief. In our discussion of the clauses of the Apostles' Creed below, we will discuss other, less important differences with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.²² The substantial overlap between both creeds in combination with the fact that both Creeds share a liturgical function, and possibly even a liturgical origin, makes that most of the following explanation of the Apostles' Creed can *mutatis mutandis* be applied to the longer Creed as well.

Our main reason for preferring the Apostles' Creed above the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, then, is the fact that the additional texts in this last creed were elicited by heresies. Focusing on the Apostles' Creed enables us to focus on the positive kerygma of the early church, and to explain that for today.

¹⁹ See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 348–357 for the origins of this praxis.

²⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 344; Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 3.

²¹ Gerard Rouwhorst, 'The Descent of Christ into the Underworld in Early Christian Liturgy,' in: Marcel Sarot & Archibald van Wieringen, *The Apostles' Creed: 'He Descended into Hell'* (STAR 24; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 78. It is also sometimes argued that this clause in the Creed has Eastern origins. Thus, for example, Catherine E. Laufer, *Hell's Destruction: An Exploration of Christ's Descent to the Dead* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 28–31. The best survey of variants does not make this probable, however: Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 236–237, suggests an origin in Northern Italy.

²² One of these is the omission of the *communio sanctorum* (mostly translated as 'communion of saints') from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It might be argued, however, that in other words, part of what is intended here can also be found in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. See below, 7.5, 133–134.

2. Why the Focus on the Christian Life?

In her excellent book on *The Making of the Creeds*, patristic scholar Frances Young explains that no other major religion attaches so much value to creeds and doctrines as Christianity. Other religions have scriptures, laws, and characteristic forms of worship and prayer, but ‘they have no “orthodoxy,” a sense of right belief which is doctrinally sound and from which deviation means heresy. [...] There may in practice be a number of different orthodoxies, but “orthodoxy” seems characteristic of Christianity.’²³ Moreover, she explains, this is ‘rather surprising.’ Christianity emerged from Judaism, and Judaism is an orthopraxy rather than an orthodoxy. In Judaism ‘right action’ is more important than ‘right belief.’ ‘Nor can we find the source in the teaching or attitudes of the founder of this religion: a dispassionate look at the gospel records hardly suggests a figure with episcopal authority propounding dogmas and excluding debaters or doubters.’²⁴ How Christianity became a doctrinal religion, Young argues, needs an explanation. She finds that explanation in the many heresies that emerged during the first centuries. Christianity needed ‘standard summaries’ as ‘tests of orthodoxy’ that could help distinguish right belief from wrong belief.²⁵ Subsequently, in her explanation of the creeds, she elegantly and insightfully explains which unorthodox positions were excluded by the creeds. In other words, though Young wonders at the early emergence of doctrinal summaries in Christianity, she does not question whether this is how the creeds should be explained: as doctrinal summaries. Here, we will tentatively try whether another approach is possible: an approach that emphasizes ‘right action’ also in the explanation of the Apostles’ Creed.

Such an approach is not only suggested by the context within which Christianity emerged, but also by the use of the creeds in the liturgy. As we stated above, the Apostles’ Creed probably has its origin in the baptismal Creed of the Christian community in early third-century Rome. We do not have much information on the preparation for Baptism – called catechumenate only from the Renaissance onwards²⁶ – in the earliest Church. It was, according to O. Pasquato, ‘a process of initiation, growth and apprenticeship through which the whole person was transformed,

²³ Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 1.

²⁴ Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 1–2.

²⁵ Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 12.

²⁶ Ottorino Pasquato, ‘Catechumenate-Discipleship,’ in: Di Bernardino a.o. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, Vol. 1, 458.

orienting his life in a radically new way toward the God of Jesus Christ and the church community.²⁷ Baptizands were formed into disciples. In his book on *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, William Harmless explains how the Creed functioned in this process. Those admitted to the final stage of this preparation, the *competentes* ('those qualified') were 'given' the Creed on a Saturday two weeks before Easter: the *traditio symboli*. The contents of the Creed were not new to them; most of it had been part of their instruction in the Christian faith up to then. But this was the first time they were given the precise text, accompanied by a line-to-line explanation. With the help of their godparents, they were expected to memorize the Creed over the next week, and then 'to recite it exactly as it had been given' on the next Saturday. This 'handing back' of the Creed functioned as a rehearsal for the solemn *redditio symboli* on Holy Saturday.²⁸ The recital of the Creed functioned as their password for Baptism and, after their Baptism, as their password for the Eucharistic celebration.²⁹ From the third century onwards, certain parts of the Christian faith and liturgy were kept hidden from those who were not baptized (the so-called *disciplina arcani*). They were welcome to participate in the Liturgy of the Word but not in the Liturgy of the Eucharist proper.

It seems unlikely that confessing the Creed in this liturgical context had merely the function of stating a series of convictions one held to be true. As Pasquato emphasizes, baptizands were not trained to become mere Christians but to become *disciples*.³⁰ Factual beliefs do not suffice for that; they hardly suffice for someone to count as a Christian. The New Testament makes this quite clear by having evil spirits confess Jesus as being 'The Holy One of God' (Mark 1:24; cf. 1:34)³¹ and the Son of God (Matt. 8:29, Mark 3:11, 5:7). If even the devils confess Christ for whom He is, that can hardly be the distinguishing characteristic of a Christian. As the Letter of James (2:19) states: 'You believe in the one God – that is creditable enough, but even the demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear.' And James continues: 'Fool! Would you not like to know that faith without deeds is useless?' (2:20). For James, then, right

²⁷ Pasquato, 'Catechumenate-Discipleship,' 459.

²⁸ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (revd. ed. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 322–324, quot. 323. On *traditio et redditio symboli*, see also Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 3.

²⁹ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, 328.

³⁰ Pasquato, 'Catechumenate-Discipleship,' 457.

³¹ All Bible quotations, unless explicitly indicated otherwise, are from the New Jerusalem Bible. We have replaced *Yahweh* by YHWH, however, to indicate that the name of God is not to be pronounced.

beliefs are important, but right actions are even more so. Indeed, this emphasis on works has not always found a friendly reception in the Christian church. Reformer Martin Luther even called the Letter of James an ‘epistle of straw’ in the first edition of his Bible translation (1522).³² When Jesus preaches about what decides who will go to heaven and who to hell, however, it is faith *and* works, and especially behavior towards one’s neighbors, that is decisive.³³ Faith and works cannot be separated. Since the gospels themselves instilled the awareness that correct beliefs do not suffice to make one a Christian, it seems unlikely that this awareness was lost so soon in early Christianity. According to Pier Beatrice, right behavior was emphasized in baptismal instructions:

The most ancient lists of sins appeared in the prebaptismal instructions directed toward pagans and Jews who were preparing to receive the sacrament of baptism for the remission of sins [...]. Outside the NT (see Gal 5:19ff.; 1 Cor 6:9ff.), the texts of the *Didache* 1-6 and the *Letter of Barnabas* 18-20 illustrate the two ways of life and death, i.e., virtue and salvation on the one hand and sin and perdition on the other. [...] Even many professions held by catechumens were considered sinful inasmuch as they were intrinsically involved in the idolatry of paganism and therefore had to be abandoned (ps.-Hipp., *Trad. Ap.* 16).³⁴

Baptism was supposed to bring with it a radical conversion from one’s sinful ways. This also made people hesitate to ask for Baptism. Once daily experience had made clear that Christians continued to sin after baptismal rebirth, the widely criticized practice of postponing baptism was introduced.³⁵

We do not know much about how the Creed was explained in the third century; we have sermons on the Creed that date only from the middle of the fourth century onwards.³⁶ These sermons concentrate on a doctrinal explanation of the Creed, not without, however, here and there hinting at the importance of behavior. Thus, for instance, Augustine of Hippo (354–430): ‘Despising the duration of your former life, you ought by holy

³² Jason D. Lane, *Luther’s Epistle of Straw: The Voice of St. James in Reformation Preaching* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

³³ See, e.g., Matt 5:2–12, 7:21–23, 10:14–15, 16:27, 18:5–9, 25:31–46, Mark 10:21, Luke 6:20–26, 13:26–27, John 5:28–29, 15:12–17.

³⁴ Pier F. Beatrice, ‘Sin,’ in: Angelo di Bernardino a.o. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), Vol. 3, 594–596, quot. 594.

³⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 651–667.

³⁶ Young, *Making of the Creeds*, 3.

practices to renew your natural life along with the new spiritual man.³⁷ These hints are not very frequent, though, and do not suffice as building blocks for an interpretation of the Creed that primarily emphasizes that by confessing the Creed, we commit ourselves to the right behavior. Nevertheless, in line with what we have seen about the importance of right behavior both in the New Testament and in the preparation of baptizands for Baptism, this is the type of interpretation that we will venture. The proof of the pudding is in the eating!

3. The Interpretation of the Creed in Light of Speech Act Theory

Literature on the Apostles' Creed comes in two forms. Some literature is purely historical: it tries to retrieve the origins of the Creed and its original meaning.³⁸ Most literature is systematic rather than historical: it tries to explain which beliefs *we* confess when we today confess the Creed. The best-known example is the explanation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but there are many other examples, both in catechisms and in theological books. These explanations mostly focus on the beliefs one holds to be true by confessing the Creed, and thus interpret the Creed as a series of factual statements. This type of interpretation we will call the received position. It is, moreover, the interpretation that comes most naturally to modern lay people: those who are not professional theologians. In contemporary Protestant circles, some theologians who take this position go so far as to reject certain clauses of the Creed – e.g., the descent to the dead³⁹ – because they lack sufficient Biblical underpinning and are, therefore, unwarranted. It is probably for a similar reason 'that Latin versions dated from the 3rd Council of Toledo (589) usually omit the word "holy" in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.'⁴⁰ Almost all late manuscripts of

³⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 215 1; translation in: Saint Augustine, *Sermons for the Liturgical Seasons* transl. by Sister Mary S. Muldowney (FaCh 38; Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 1959).

³⁸ Examples include: Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, Young, *Making of the Creeds*.

³⁹ John Piper, 'Did Christ ever Descend into Hell?', *The Christian Post* 23 April 2011 <http://www.christianpost.com/news/did-christ-ever-descend-to-hell-49959/> [31 01 2023]; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 582–594; Adrian Warnock, *Raised with Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 33–34.

⁴⁰ T. Herbert Bindley & F.W. Green, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London: Methuen, 1950), 74.

the definition of Chalcedon⁴¹ do the same, and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer follows this tradition.⁴² That the holiness of the Church is conceived as problematic is no recent phenomenon.

In light of the problems to which an interpretation of the Creed as a series of factual statements leads, it does not come as a surprise that we find other types of explanations. Among those, the nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher takes pride of place. According to him, religious experiences are fundamental, and theology and doctrine provide expressions of these experiences. Religion is a feeling of absolute dependence, and religious language expresses the affections religious believers experience.⁴³ 'Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech.'⁴⁴ Theological language does not describe a transcendent reality outside of us, but it expresses our relationship to God. For Schleiermacher Christology, for instance, is based on the experience of salvation of the Christian community. Jesus is the source of that experience. For that, He must have been the perfection of humanity in relation to God; in other words, He must have had a perfect consciousness of God. Eventually, then, Christology is an expression of our experience of salvation rather than a factual description of who Jesus was.⁴⁵

Another theologian who opposes the received position is the postliberal theologian George Lindbeck. He dubs the positions described above as cognitive propositional and experiential expressive and provides his own alternative: the cultural-linguistic approach. On this approach, 'a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.'⁴⁶ On this rule-based understanding of doctrine, doctrine functions like grammatical rules: while these tell us how to speak and write, doctrine tells us how to believe.⁴⁷

⁴¹ As mentioned above, it is in the definition of Chalcedon (451) that we first find the text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

⁴² John Dowden (attr.), 'The Anglican Version of the "Nicene" Creed,' *Church Quarterly Review* 8 (1879), 372–383.

⁴³ E. Mouton, 'Faith, Language and Experience: An Analysis of the Feeling of Absolute Dependence,' *HTS Theological Studies* 46/3 (1990), 353.

⁴⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016), §15.

⁴⁵ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*. Cf. James M. Brandt, *All Things New: Reform of Church and Society in Schleiermacher's Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 37–38.

⁴⁶ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 33.

⁴⁷ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 79–84.

Another metaphor Lindbeck uses is that of a map: theology provides orientation to the believer. It shapes and informs religious experiences rather than that it expresses them.⁴⁸ In other words, Lindbeck emphasizes the *prescriptive* character of Christian doctrine.

Summarizing, among those who try to explain what we do when we confess the Creed, we find three different views of what sort of ‘assertions’ the articles of the Creed are. On the received position, they are factual; according to Schleiermacher and liberal protestants, they are expressive (of religious feelings), and according to Lindbeck and postliberal theologians, they are prescriptive. Above, we have suggested a fourth type of interpretation: the interpretation of the Creed as some sort of commitment. That we arrive at four types of interpretations and that it is these four types we arrive at is not a coincidence. The way we have been introducing the variety of interpretations was influenced by a theory in the philosophy of language: speech act theory. While the traditional philosophy of language assumes that words and sentences refer and describe, we have assumed that it is not words and sentences that do something, but *we* who perform acts *by means of them*. Here, we are indebted to John Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*.⁴⁹ While the traditional philosophy of language assumed that the one function of language is descriptive and referring, that is to say, constative, we have assumed that we can perform other types of acts by means of language: expressive, prescriptive, and commissive acts.⁵⁰

Above, we have argued for the view that the Apostles’ Creed should primarily be interpreted as commissive. This argument was based both on the nature of first-century Judaism and the message of Jesus, and on the function of the Creed in liturgy. Therefore, it seems useful to have a look

⁴⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 51–52.

⁴⁹ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). Austin himself was influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

⁵⁰ Here, we are indebted to Vincent Brümmer, who improved and refined Austin’s classification of speech acts and arrives at these four types of speech acts. Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 15–16. Most contemporary applications of speech act theory employ John Searle’s version as presented in his classic *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969). This is not the place to compare the merits of both, but we think that Brümmer’s version is more helpful. Could it be that it has been ignored because it was not published in a scholarly book or article on speech act theory, but rather in a textbook for theologians?

at the nature of commissive speech acts here. Brümmer explains: 'In a commissive a speaker commits himself, before his hearer(s), to some specific future act(s).'⁵¹ The examples he gives include those of persons committing themselves *contractually* to a certain mode of behavior and accepting legal responsibility for following this line of behavior, of two persons taking a marriage *vow* before God that they will live together in love and remain true to each other, of persons *promising* to do something, of persons expressing their *intention* to do something, and of persons *implying* that they will not do something. Brümmer continues by explaining:

- In a commissive speech act, I always 'commit myself [...] to do or not to do certain things, and I declare myself answerable to my hearers for fulfilling this commitment.'
- Commissives do not fail by being false, but through violation. This violation can take place only after the commissive has been made. When the commissive is made, it is not true or false, but sincere (if the person making it has the intention to fulfill the obligation taken upon herself) or insincere (if she does not have this intention).
- The 'obligation may be more or less binding: in concluding contracts and taking vows a speaker accepts a very strong obligation. [...] In the case of ordinary promises the obligation is less strong.'⁵²

The idea that the Creed contains commissive speech acts is not entirely new. In his classic little book on the interpretation of the Creed, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, Nicholas Lash argues that it does. Or rather, by comparing confessing the Creed to exchanging marriage vows, he argues that confessing the Creed *is* a commissive speech act:

As we use it in the Creed, in a public act of worship, 'I believe' does not express an opinion, however well-founded or firmly held, concerning God's existence. It promises that life and love, mind, heart, and all my actions, are set henceforward steadfastly on God, and God alone. 'William James, do you take Mary Montague to your lawful wedded wife? 'I do.' 'Mary Montague, do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?' 'I do.' The grammar of these two declarations is the same.⁵³

Like a marriage vow, confessing the Creed is *performative*: 'It brings about a new state of affairs of some sort.'⁵⁴ The Creed is a pledge of

⁵¹ Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, 21.

⁵² Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, 22.

⁵³ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 18.

⁵⁴ Richard A. Norris, 'I Believe in God, the Father Almighty,' in: Roger E. Van Harn (ed.), *Exploring & Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed* (London: Morehouse, 2004), 22.

allegiance; by confessing the Creed, one binds oneself to God. Only when we interpret the Creed as a commissive speech act, only when we interpret it on the analogy of the making of marriage vows, can we explain why the confession of the Creed is a condition for being allowed to baptism. To believe is not merely to accept some statements as true. As we have seen, the devil does so as well. To believe is to commit oneself to living one's life in and from the relationship with God. Only when the believer commits herself to God in the Creed, will God commit himself to the believer under the sign of baptism. And only when we interpret this commitment as the basic action performed by praying the Creed, can we understand how the other actions belong together and why we cannot leave one out. Let's again quote Lash:

There may be many things which, as Christians, we believe, but we seriously misunderstand the grammar of the Creed if we suppose its primary purpose to be that of furnishing a list of them. To say the Creed is to say, not many things, but one. To say the Creed is to perform an act which has one object: right worship of the mystery of God. [...] It is not possible to make additions to the Creed because, in using it, we have but one thing to say in recognition: 'Yes,' 'Amen.'⁵⁵

Here, Lash makes two claims: one about the unity of the Creed, and another about its nature. As to the unity of the Creed, a comparison with marriage vows can again be helpful. On the traditional Catholic formula, the bridegroom promises: 'I, ____, take you, ____, for my lawful wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. I will love and honor you all the days of my life.' The bridegroom promises many things, but all these together constitute *one* vow.⁵⁶ The formula used in the Episcopal Churches makes this explicit by adding "This is my solemn vow." This also applies to the Creed: the many clauses form a *unity*. As to the nature of that unity, Lash claims that it is a *vow*. He does not claim that every individual sentence is a separate vow, but that taken all together, they constitute one vow. This implies that reciting or confessing the Creed is very different from stating a conviction; it is, rather, an '*act of worship*,' a '*public act of prayer*.'⁵⁷

Unlike ordinary prayers, the Creed is not formally addressed to God. In the liturgy of baptism, it is spoken before the congregation and before

⁵⁵ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 16.

⁵⁶ On the unity of the Creed, see also De Lubac, *Christian Faith*, 56–57.

⁵⁷ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 8. On creeds as prayers, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 2003), 179–181.

God, and followed by accepting the catechumen into the covenant. In the Eucharist, it is again said before the congregation and before God followed by admission to the meal of the covenant. It is not confessing the Creed itself that brings about acceptance into the congregation; it is God's reaction to that vow, mediated by the priest who baptizes. When Thomas P. Rausch claims that 'to recite the Creed is to enter into a relationship,'⁵⁸ he takes for granted the loving and accepting reaction of God in the sacrament of baptism and, subsequently, the eucharist.

The fact that the Creed is not formally addressed to God may be explained by its origin in the liturgy of baptism. Originally, historians have argued, the Creed may have had a question-and-answer form. The bishop who was to baptize the baptizands asked them questions like 'Do you believe in God, the omnipotent Father?' and the baptizand answered, 'I believe.' In this practice, the answer is formally addressed to the bishop. The declaratory form of the Creed, as we have it now, may perhaps be explained by the catechetical training preceding baptism; then again, this might explain why the Creed is not formally addressed to God.⁵⁹ As it is confessed in the liturgy, however, it may not be formally addressed to God, but it is certainly *said before* God, and it is certainly assumed that God will hear the Creed and that in reaction to it, God – and not just the bishop – will accept the baptizand into his flock. The fact that the confession of the Creed is intended to be heard by God and to evoke a reaction from God makes it into a prayer, even though it does not have the typical form of a prayer.

Starting from the assumption that this atypical prayer is a pledge of allegiance, we will embark on interpreting it. If the assumption is correct, it will be fruitful and help us to clarify the nature of the Creed. As we have seen above, interpreting the Creed as commissive fits with its origin in first-century Judaism, with the message of Jesus himself and with the Creed's function in the liturgy. Therefore, it is plausible that this approach will help us understand the original meaning of the Creed. Interpreting the Creed as commissive, however, may also help to tease out its significance for today. In our time, the most vehement discussions within Christianity are not about Christian doctrine but about Christian behavior. Moral and societal issues become more and more important:

⁵⁸ Thomas P. Rausch, *I Believe in God: A Reflection on the Apostles' Creed* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 27.

⁵⁹ For the discussion on this issue, see, e.g., Bray, *We Believe*, xxxii, Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 31–52, Vinzent, *Ursprung des Apostolikums*, 219–266, Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 46–72.

sexual ethics, and especially homosexuality, gender issues, abortion, divorce, our care for creation, for the poor, for fugitives. Pope Francis's papacy fits well in this trend. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which he first communicated his view for the Church today, he briefly discusses the Creed in a section with the title 'Confession of faith and commitment to society.' Here and elsewhere, the Pope underlines the 'inseparable bond' between 'our acceptance of the message of salvation' in the Creed and our commitment to society, a commitment which expresses itself in evangelization, 'justice, [...] effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists and promotes.'⁶⁰ Pope John Paul II opposed secularism, Pope Benedict XVI relativism, and Pope Francis the idea that our religious convictions matter more than our actions. It is our hope that this explanation of the Creed may contribute to this agenda. As said before: The proof of the pudding is in the eating!

That the basic nature of the Creed is that of a vow does not imply that every individual clause of the Creed is commissive. The Creed contains constatives ('He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.'), expressives (when one says 'I believe in God' this is about belief *in* rather than belief *that*, and thus it is an expression of trust rather than a factual claim that a state of affairs is the case in reality), and we would not want to exclude in advance the possibility that it contains prescriptives.⁶¹ If the Creed were merely commissive, one might mistake it as saying that it does not matter *what* one believes, as long as one believes it sincerely. In that case, the depth of one's commitment would be the only thing that counted, while the object of one's commitment would go almost unnoticed.⁶² The contrary is true: just like lovers, when given the chance to write their own marriage vow, will praise each other, the Creed provides a worshipful portrayal of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Taken all together the clauses of the Creed constitute *one* vow: I commit myself, with everything I have and am, *to the Triune God*.

If Nicholas Lash is the theologian who has expressed most clearly the commissive nature of the Creed, one might expect his explanation of the individual articles to clarify how these can be taken to contribute to the commissive nature of the Creed as a whole. Unfortunately, this is not

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (2013), 178–179.

⁶¹ It has sometimes been argued that when we confess the holiness and catholicity of the Church, we are not claiming that the Church *is* holy and catholic, but that it *should* be so. We will come back to this below.

⁶² Charles P. Arand, 'Luther on the Creed,' *Lutheran Quarterly* 20 (2006), 3.

the case. When Lash is commenting on the individual articles of the Creed, he seems to have forgotten what he claimed earlier about its commissive nature. In this respect, we will have to try to do better in this book. When it comes to the structure of the Creed, however, Lash's interpretation is much more useful. It is to the structure of the Creed that we will now turn.

4. The Trinitarian Structure of the Creed

If the fundamental nature of the Creed is that of a vow, this has implications for the structure of the Creed: it cannot be structured like a chain or like a logical argument. If one link of a chain breaks, the chain is broken. If one step of a logical argument fails, the whole argument is a fallacy. In a logical argument, the parts constitute the whole, and the whole is as strong as its weakest part. It is not like that with the Creed: here, conversely, the whole supports the parts. The 'yes' to the whole precedes the 'yes' to the parts. One is not handed down the individual clauses, but the Creed as a whole. And if one has trouble accepting one of the clauses, that is no reason to reject the whole. Rather, when we confess the Creed and thus make a fundamental commitment to the triune God, if there is a clause in the Creed that we have difficulties accepting, we will assume that also this clause has something to say to us and recite it on the assumption that we can 'grow into' it. It is the same with a marriage vow. At the moment of marriage, one may have difficulties imagining what 'till death do us part' means, or certain forms of illness may repel one. Nevertheless, one commits oneself to the other in health and sickness, all the days of one's life. And one knows it is possible to do so because others have gone before us, and – if one is a Christian – one will be helped by God's grace.⁶³ Similarly, we dare to confess the Creed, even if we have difficulties with a specific clause: trusting the tradition that has transmitted it to us, trusting the grace of God that will help us grow in our faith.⁶⁴

Having established that, in a sense, the whole of the Creed precedes the parts, we still need to establish what these parts are. We have discussed above the legend according to which each of the Apostles contributed one

⁶³ This does not mean that if one is not a Christian, one will not be helped by God's grace, but that if one is not a Christian, one will not trust on God's grace while making the vow.

⁶⁴ Henk Witte, 'Credo ecclesiam: De Kerk als voorwerp van geloven,' *Communio: Internationaal Katholiek tijdschrift* 35/6 (2010), 406–407.

article to the Creed. We have argued that this shows that in the early church, the Apostles' Creed was taken to be a faithful summary of the kerygma of the apostles. Many interpreters, however, have also drawn conclusions from this legend for the *structure* of the Creed. They take it to have twelve separate articles. Already Ambrose took the Creed in this way: 'Just as there are twelve apostles, so there are twelve articles.'⁶⁵ The common division of the Creed into twelve articles runs as follows:

1. I believe in God the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth,
2. I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.
3. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
4. He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
5. He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
6. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the
Father.
7. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
9. the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
10. the forgiveness of sins,
11. the resurrection of the body,
12. and the life everlasting. Amen.

If this is the structure of the Creed, that has important implications for its interpretation. Belief in the holy Catholic Church, for example, appears on the same level as belief in the Holy Spirit. 'The communion of saints,' moreover, is taken as an apposition to 'the Holy Catholic Church.' 'Saints,' then, should be interpreted in line with Paul's use of the term. Paul referred to all the recipients of his letters as 'saints,' and thus used the term to refer to Christians in general. An interpretation of the term 'saints' as people of exemplary holiness is thus excluded. Another interpretation, on which *sanctorum* should be taken as a genitive of *sancta* rather than of *sancti*, and thus refers to the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, thus also becomes less likely.

⁶⁵ Ambrose, *Explanatio symboli*, 8.

These are just two examples of the way in which the structure of the Creed affects its interpretation. If we would be certain of this division into twelve articles, this would be no problem. But we are not! The division of the Apostles' Creed into twelve articles is relatively late, and moreover, the manuscripts do not agree on how to divide the Creed. *Codex Sessorianus* 52,⁶⁶ for example, takes belief in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Catholic Church together in article eight, and belief in the communion of saints separately in article 9.⁶⁷ This leads, of course, to a different interpretation. The problem is not only that the Creed itself does not provide any indication as to its correct division into twelve articles. The problem goes deeper: a division into twelve articles 'does not correspond with the primitive arrangement of the formula; it is a later and artificial arrangement, which obscures rather than sheds light on the relationships between the articles.'⁶⁸

Therefore, it is not surprising that various other structures have been suggested. The part of the Creed on Jesus is structured *historically*: it runs from the conception by the Holy Spirit to Jesus' return for the last judgment. Since the section on God the Father mentions God as Creator, it seems obvious to relate this article to the period before Jesus. The final part should then be read as relating to the period after Jesus; after all, the Spirit is not poured out on the disciples until Jesus' ascension. This gives the Apostles' Creed a nice salvation-historical structure: the period before Jesus – Jesus – the period after Jesus. Accepting this structure again has an influence on one's interpretation of the Creed. It draws attention to creation as *beginning* rather than as continuing, and it suggests that only through Jesus do we have access to resurrection and eternal life. Although there is something to be said for such a salvation-historical reading of the Creed, it cannot be maintained consistently: the second coming will take place in the future, while the Church and the forgiveness of sins (which are mentioned after the second coming) are already here. Forgiveness of sins also took place before and during Jesus' lifetime, and creation is not merely a past phenomenon.⁶⁹ We can learn from this proposal, however, that the Apostles' Creed is no exposition of timeless truths but addresses the concrete salvific historical action of God.

⁶⁶ This is a 12th-century copy of a 9th-century manuscript. See F.J. Badcock, *The History of the Creeds* (London: SPCK, 1938), 151.

⁶⁷ Vinzent, *Ursprung des Apostolikums*, 28.

⁶⁸ De Lubac, *Christian Faith*, 55 (quoting in translation a text of Joseph A. Jungmann).

⁶⁹ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 30.

A similar, more promising division is suggested by Martin Luther in his two Catechisms of 1529, the *Small Catechism* and the *Large Catechism*. Luther distinguishes the same three parts but distinguishes them *functionally* rather than temporally: the first part is on creation, the second part on redemption, the third on sanctification. Again, accepting this division will influence one's interpretation. In the first part, for example, 'I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,' all emphasis will then fall on God as almighty Creator, and little attention will go to what more it can mean that God is our Father. Below, in our commentary on the separate articles, we will suggest that God's Fatherhood has profound meaning even apart from God's being Creator. The problem with Luther's division is, of course, that creation is not the work of the Father only, redemption not of the Son only, and sanctification not of the Spirit only. In creation, redemption, and sanctification, all three persons of the Trinity are involved. In an ancient axiom: *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: everything done by the Trinity *ad extra* (outside the Godhead) is done by the three persons together. This does not mean that their actions cannot be *distinguished*; they can, but they cannot be *divided*. To give a famous example: it is the Son who dies on the Cross, but this does not mean that only the Son is involved. The Father suffers the death of the Son, and 'what proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive.'⁷⁰ We accept, therefore, the threefold division of the Creed while characterizing the three parts differently: they are simply about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁷¹

In our time, Nicolas Lash has argued vigorously for this trinitarian structure of the Creed: 'This one confession finds expression in three articles. Historically, there is no doubt whatsoever but that the Creed, like the baptismal formulas from which it derived, is trinitarian in form. It has three articles, confessing faith in Father, Son, and Spirit.'⁷² On this reading of the Creed, its structure is the following:

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 244.

⁷¹ Luther had suggested such a division already in 1520. See Arand, 'Luther on the Creed,' 2. Our information on Luther in this paragraph is taken from Arand, who provides references to the sources. Here we ignore other, less plausible, divisions of the Creed, like the medieval one that divides it into fourteen articles. On that, see, De Lubac, *Christian Faith*, 59–60.

⁷² Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 26.

I believe in God the Father almighty,

Creator of heaven and earth,

I believe in Jesus Christ,

his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit:

the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting. Amen.

Let's note, first, that the text of the Creed itself, in the threefold repetition of *Credo*, suggests this division into three articles. Secondly, this threefold structure is also supported by what historians of the Creed tell us about its origin, namely that there are parallel forms with three baptismal questions (and that the interrogative form may even be the original one): Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit? The connection with Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit also explains, thirdly, how a Creed originally dating from before the trinitarian dogma can nevertheless have a trinitarian structure. We should note, fourthly, that if we interpret the Creed on the analogy of a marriage vow, we should expect the persons to whom we pledge our vow to stand out in importance, and the rest of the Creed to be as it were dependent on them. Thus, this type of interpretation requires a trinitarian structure of the Creed.

It might be argued against a trinitarian structure that it implies that the length of the articles is uneven. In English, the second article counts 74 words, the third article 28, and the first only 12. This reflects that the earliest Christians felt that what they believed about the Father needed less explanation; by believing in one God they continued the Jewish faith of centuries. Belief in Jesus, however, was new, and that God had become man needed quite some explanation. This applied also, but to a lesser extent, to belief in the Spirit. Thus, the uneven length of the articles can

be explained from what needed to be said about each of the three persons of the Trinity.

Like the division into twelve articles, a division into three articles has implications for the interpretation of the Creed. It implies that belief in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, etc., is not on the same level as belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It implies, moreover, that we do not believe in the holy catholic Church, etc., as such, but as actions of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ We will try to develop the implications of this below, but so much is clear already, that the Creed does not require one to believe in the Church insofar as it is not a work of the Spirit. Moreover, it is obvious that confessing the Church as a work of the Spirit qualifies and strengthens the interpretation suggested above: here, we pledge ourselves not just *to make* the Church holier and more catholic, but *to let the Spirit work in and through us* to do so. We make ourselves available as instruments of the Spirit, nothing less. It is especially this part of the Creed through which we pledge our allegiance to the trinitarian God and commit ourselves to the kind of life God requires of us.

⁷³ See, e.g., Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 11.

I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth

1. Words and the Company They Keep

When we compare the Jewish declaration of faith, the *Shema Yisrael*, to the Apostles' Creed, the difference is striking. The *Shema* begins with Deut. 6:4–9:

Listen, Israel: YHWH our God is the one, the only YHWH.
 You must love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
 with all your strength.
 Let the words I enjoin on you today stay in your heart.
 You shall tell them to your children, and keep on telling them, when you
 are sitting at home, when you
 are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are standing
 up;
 you must fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a
 headband;
 you must write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Judaism is a *religion of the law*, and the redemption of human beings requires observance of the law and study of the Torah. It is fitting, then, that the *Shema* begins with a central text from the law. The Christian Creed begins differently, with an expression of *belief*. We will see below what precisely this means, but it is clear that the law recedes into the background. However, there is also continuity. The apostles were all Jews, and they were convinced that the God in whom they believed in a new way was the same God in whom they had believed their whole lives. When they confess belief in God, this God is YHWH, the God of Israel. It is against this background that we will have to understand the Creed. It colors the meaning of 'God,' 'Father,' 'our Lord,' and other terms. Also, when the Creed opens new perspectives on God, e.g., by distinguishing between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these are new perspectives on *this God*, whom, through Jesus Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles had learned to see in new ways.

Traditional explanations of the Creed often begin by explaining what it means to believe in God and subsequently explain what it means to

call God 'Father.' This applies, for instance, to the currently most authoritative explanation of the Creed, that in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.¹ Here, we will turn around this order. Nicholas Lash claims: 'Words [...] take meaning from the company they keep.'² This also applies to 'I believe' in the Apostles' Creed: it makes a difference in the interpretation of these words *in whom* we believe. There's a well-known Dutch song by a popular singer, André Hazes, called 'She believes in me.' This song is about his wife, who despite his alcohol addiction, continues to love and support him. That is another type of 'belief in' than belief in God. If we are correct, the 'I believe in' in the Apostles' Creed acquires a special meaning from the fact that it is God *the Father* that we believe in. So we will begin by (against the background of Old Testament Judaism) inquiring what it means to call God 'Father.'

2. What Does It Mean to Call God Father?

When we speak of God as Father, we speak metaphorically.³ God is not literally a father.⁴ In its literal meaning, 'father' is a biological term. By extension it also has a social meaning: one can fulfill the function of a father in a family without being the biological father. God's fathership is not biological, nor does God fulfill the social function of a father in Christian families. Moreover, fathers are male and God is not, because He is not a biological, sexed being. Saying that speech about God's fathership is metaphorical does not imply that it is *merely* expressive (e.g., of trust) without describing. Metaphors often have reality corresponding to

¹ In section one of CCC, it discusses belief, in section two the profession of faith. That section is divided into four paragraphs: 1 'I Believe in God,' 2 The Father, 3 The Almighty, 4 The Creator. The separation between the discussion of belief and that of the Father is also made in J.I. Packer, *Affirming the Apostles' Creed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books), 25–49.

² Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 12. Lash makes this claim in a context different from that in which we reproduce it and does not draw the conclusion from it we draw. Like most others, he separates discussion of belief from discussion of the Father: Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 17–54.

³ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 66–83; cf. Adele Reinhartz (ed.), 'God the Father in the Gospel of John,' *Semeia* 85 (1999), *passim*.

⁴ Soskice, *Kindness*, 69 suggests that the Arians took God to be literally a Father. In our time, the Mormons may be mentioned. See Stephen E. Robinson, 'God the Father: Overview,' in: Daniel H. Ludlow (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 548–550.

them. In Janet Martin Soskice's terms: religious metaphors may be *reality depicting*.⁵ Using terms metaphorically means 'spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.'⁶ As a result, metaphors 'always contain the whisper, "it is and it is not."⁷ This is not without danger because there is an ever-present risk that, at a certain stage, we no longer hear this whisper. 'We become so used to looking on A as B that we fail to notice the differences between them.'⁸ This danger is especially acute in what we call *dead metaphors*, metaphors that are conventionally fixed in our language to such a degree that we no longer *experience* them as metaphors. Talking about the leg of a table or the foot of a mountain are obvious examples. For many people, talking about God as Father falls into the same category: they are so used to addressing God as Father that they believe that God *is* Father. They no longer experience this use of the term 'Father' as metaphorical and no longer hear the whisper *it is not*.

For people who tend to take the designation of God as Father as literal or almost literal, it is healthy to be reminded of the fact that while Jesus consistently addressed God as Father, this was, in his time, far from common, and one might even argue that it was revolutionary. In the New Testament, Jesus calls God Father more than 170 times, and in prayer, He never addresses God otherwise.⁹ When we compare this with the way in which God was addressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find that in this much larger body of literature, God is called Father a mere fifteen times, and never in prayer.¹⁰ In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is not 'our

⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 141 *et passim*.

⁶ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 15.

⁷ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

⁸ Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 8.

⁹ There is one exception: Mark 15:34 par., but that is a quotation. See B.M.F. van Iersel, 'Der Sohn' in den synoptischen Jesusworten: *Christusbezeichnung der Gemeinde oder Selbstbezeichnung Jesu?* (Leiden; Brill, 1964), 110.

¹⁰ Soskice, *Kindness*, 75 claims that God is called Father in the Hebrew Scriptures only eleven times, and never in prayer, without giving references to the Biblical texts. Robert H. Stein, 'Fatherhood of God,' in: Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House 1996), gives the figure of 15 times and provides a list of references: 'God is specifically called the Father of the nation of Israel (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; [twice] 64:8; Jeremiah 3:4 Jeremiah 3:19; 31:9; Mal 1:6; 2:10) or the Father of

Father', but 'the God of our Fathers,' which is quite something else. In neighboring religions, gods are called fathers without hesitance; they can even be biological fathers of human beings. In the words of Paul Ricoeur: 'All the people of the Near East designate God as father and even invoke them by the name of father. This appellation is not simply the common property of the Semites; comparative history of religions teaches us that it is found in India, China, Australia, Africa, and among the Greeks and Romans. All men used to call God their father.'¹¹

In this respect, the Mosaic religion is much more reserved. The relationship between God and humans is seen in terms of *covenant* rather than of *kinship*. God is Creator, Liberator, and Lawgiver rather than Father. When it comes to making images of God, the Hebrew Scriptures are strikingly iconoclastic. The portrayal of God in images, especially sculptured images, is associated with idolatry and absolutely forbidden (Ex. 20:3–6, Lev. 26:1, Numb. 33:52, Deut. 4:16–19, 27:15). When God's Name is revealed from the burning bush in Exodus 3, the Name that is given refers without having any obvious meaning and moreover, after returning from the Babylonian exile, the Jews gradually ceased to pronounce the Name.¹² Using the tetragrammaton *YHWH* for God seems anti-anthropomorphic in itself. All precautions are taken to avoid that we can capture God in a name. Given this context, it seems hardly to be a coincidence that the designation of God as Father appears so seldom in the Hebrew Scriptures; this seems to be a case of deliberate avoidance of an offensive way of speaking.¹³ Moreover, of the few cases in which the term Father is used, some explicitly underline this reserve. Take Jer. 3:19b–20 (NRSV), for example:

certain individuals (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Psalm 68:5; 89:26) only fifteen times.' On Isaiah 63:16, 64:7 and Psalm 89:27 – sometimes mentioned as exceptions – see Joachim Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie I: Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 69. See also Van Iersel, 'Der Sohn' in den synoptischen Jesusworten, 104–110.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* edited by Don Ihde (1989; rpt. London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 483. Cf. W.A. Van Gemenen, "ABBA" in the Old Testament, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (1988), 391.

¹² See, e.g., George H. van Kooten, 'Moses/Musaeus/Mochos and his God Yahweh, Iao, and Sabaoth, Seen from a Graeco-Roman Perspective,' in: George H. van Kooten (ed.), *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses: Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 115, and the references given there.

¹³ Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie I*, 70–71.

I thought you would call me, My Father,
and would not turn from following me.
Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband,
so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel,
says the LORD.

Three things are worth noticing here. First, the image of father is immediately followed by that of a husband, thus underlining that neither of both can be taken literally.¹⁴ Second, the situation in which Israel addresses God as Father is not the present situation, but one of eschatological salvation (see also Jer. 31:9, Ps. 89:26). And third, the Fatherhood of God that is mentioned here concerns the *people of Israel* rather than individual Israelites.

When Jesus subsequently addresses God as Father, it is obvious that this way of addressing God is not based on God's relationship with the people of Israel of which Jesus is a member. Rather, He addresses God as Father because of his own, very specific, most intimate relationship with God. This becomes clear from the fact that He qualifies the image by using a specific term, *abba*, which subsequent early Christians judged to be so striking that they handed over the Aramaic term in three instances in the New Testament (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6). This is a term that presupposes a certain degree of intimacy – scholars disagree about the exact degree¹⁵ – and that thus readjusts the image of Fatherhood. According to Joachim Jeremias, the term *abba* expresses the heart of Jesus' relationship with God.¹⁶

Moreover, for Jesus, the Fatherhood of God was a *present* reality. By addressing God as Father He implicitly claims that in him, the eschatological salvation announced by the prophets is finally breaking through. That this is indeed the case, can also be seen from the way in which the Fatherhood and the eschatological Kingship of God are connected in key places in the New Testament. Paul Ricoeur suggests: 'Eschatological royalty and fatherhood remain inseparable right into the Lord's Prayer; this begins with the invocation of the Father and is continued by the "petitions" concerning name, kingdom and will which are understandable only in the perspective of an eschatological fulfilment.'¹⁷

¹⁴ See Ricoeur, *Conflict*, 489. We see a similar alternation of metaphors in Deuteronomy, when God is called Father in Deut. 32:6 and Mother in 32:18.

¹⁵ See, most famously, James Barr, "ABBĀ isn't "Daddy,"" *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988), 28–47. Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 27, 29.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie* I, 70–73; Soskice, *Kindness*, 77.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Conflict*, 490. Cf. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 28.

In short, in *Mosaic religion* the Fatherhood of God did not yet play a significant role and *the prophets* were looking forward to the time in which God would become both Father and Husband of the people of Israel. *Jesus' personal relationship* with God, intimate like that with a father of a family, may be seen as the beginning of the fulfilment of these expectations.

We need to regain this background to acquire a feeling for how daring, yes how revolutionary Jesus' way of addressing God as Father was. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the intertestamental literature¹⁸ avoided addressing God in this way, even though it was common in neighbouring religions.

I am assuming here that it was Jesus who first introduced this new way of addressing God, and not, as some have argued, other first-century rabbis.¹⁹ That it was Jesus indeed who brought about this change, seems likely because the term *abba* is so strongly attested that the way Jesus used this term to address God must have 'distinguished Jesus in a significant degree from his contemporaries.'²⁰ Its application to God must have been novel at the time. Moreover, when other early rabbinical texts are mentioned as referring to God as 'Father,' we must be aware of the fact that the dating of this type of texts is often quite uncertain²¹ and that they depict God as the Father of the people, not of the individual believer.²² But it does not really matter: even if Jesus was in this respect indebted to other contemporary rabbis, all of them could thus address God as Father only against a background that had been so reluctant to do this and generally so anti-anthropomorphic, that they did not run the risk that the image would be taken literally and thus become idolatrous.

When Jesus addresses God as Father, He did not look backward to a past in which God generated humanity in the way fathers generate children, but forward to a nearby future in which humanity will find its fulfilment in a new intimacy with the Father, an intimacy opened up to us by the Son and achievable only by becoming one with him. Once again: Jesus' way of addressing God as Father did not become possible against a background in which the Fatherhood of God was common

¹⁸ Stein, 'Fatherhood of God.'

¹⁹ This is the position of Alon Goshen-Gottstein, 'God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001), 470–504.

²⁰ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 27.

²¹ Anthony D. York, 'The Dating of Targumic Literature,' *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 5 (1974), 49–62.

²² Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie* I, 69.

ground. It was the other way round: The way in which Jesus addressed God as Father was ‘audacious and unprecedented,’²³ and Jesus could introduce it only against a background in which it was uncommon. Moreover, He could only do this because of the special relationship He himself had with the Father: there is no Father without Son (and no Son without Father, of course). It is the Son who makes the Father known to us (John 1:18). And it is only because the Son was the firstborn among many brothers and sisters, that we may call God Father:

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. [...] Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family (Rom. 8:14–16, 29 NRSV; cf. John 1:12).

In the New Testament, therefore, God is primarily Jesus’ Father, but the Spirit transfers his relationship to the Father, as it were, to his followers, so that they too may call God ‘Father.’ The being children of God of Christians is dependent on Jesus being the Son of God. This also implies that it is not by virtue of being human that people are children of God but by virtue of being *Christians*.²⁴ We should once more become conscious of the fact that it is not a matter of course that we may call God ‘Father’; when we do this we use a daring image – though we do believe that it is an image to which reality corresponds. In the Roman Catholic liturgy this awareness is kept alive by the *audemus dicere* of the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer: Only on the instigation of Jesus we *dare say* ‘Our Father’. By taking the *audemus dicere* seriously, we may keep alive the awareness that God’s Fatherhood is no ordinary fatherhood.

The Lord’s Prayer is important for understanding the Fatherhood of God also in this respect: we are taught to pray ‘Our Father,’ not ‘My Father.’ In the case of Jesus, God is his Father in his own right; other Christians are adopted as a group, and it is as members of this group, the community of Christians, that they are children of God.²⁵ It is, therefore,

²³ Ricoeur, *Conflict*, 489.

²⁴ On the question *who* may call themselves children of God, see James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus as Reflected in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 24–26; Van Iersel, ‘Der Sohn’ in den synoptischen Jesusworten, 110–113.

²⁵ See, e.g., Matt. 5:16 and Rom. 1:7. See also Bo Reicke, ‘Vater,’ in: Bo Reicke & Leonhard Rost (eds.), *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch* Vol. 3 P-Z (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), 2072.

obvious to think here of the Johannine image of Christ as the vine, the disciples as the branches, and the Pauline image of Christ as the head, the church as his body. This does not take away that, though Christians are adopted as a group, each of them may individually all God 'Father' (Matt. 6:4,6, 12:50, Luke 11:2, John 12:26). God is not the Father of the Church but the Father of individual Christians.

We are now in a position to discuss the question of what we are doing when we confess God as Father. By doing so, we confess our belief that Jesus brought the eschatological salvation announced by the Old Testament prophets. In other words, Jesus brought about a fundamental change in humanity's relationship with God – and, thereby, also in ours. When we call God Father, inspired by the Holy Spirit we let ourselves be drawn into Jesus' relationship to God the Father and accept his Father as our Father. Thus, we not only commit ourselves to honor God like we should honor our parents according to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12, Deut. 5:16),²⁶ but we go far beyond that. We accept that Jesus brought reconciliation between God and us, so that we may address his Father as our Father. We commit ourselves to emulate Jesus' relationship with his Father: to be prayerful people, to honor God, to trust God, and to accept God's guidance in our lives. Accepting the Fatherhood of God, however, is not merely about how we relate to God; it is about the whole of our lives. Gerald Vann and P.K. Meagher explain:

The child is normally without anxiety about things which worry his parents: he has confidence that they will see that he is fed and clothed, will guard him from danger, will comfort him if he is hurt. [...] he cannot of course leave everything to his parents, he has to make his own efforts and learn to do things for himself; but in making those efforts he feels behind him is parents' sustaining hands, and his faith in them gives him faith in himself.²⁷

Our acknowledging God as Father, then, will have an impact on everything we do. It will have a special influence on how we relate to other people. 'You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5:43–45; cf. Luke 6:36).

²⁶ On the connection between God being Father and our obligations to God, see Dewi Z. Phillips, 'God and Ought,' in: Paul Helm (ed.), *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 175–180.

²⁷ Gerald Vann & P.K. Meagher, *The Temptations of Christ* (1957; London: Fontana Books, 1966), 70–71. Cf. Matt. 6:26, 32.

By calling God Father, we also accept that other Christians are our sisters and brothers and that we should treat them as such. This also has ecumenical implications. The simple fact that we confess the Creed has ecumenical importance: by it, we step into a fellowship with all those who have done so before us and who are doing so elsewhere. This is underlined by the fact that together, we call God our Father: we are part of a family of Christians that goes beyond our own Church. This brought Pope Francis to the claim that praying to God as Father ‘is the oxygen of ecumenism.’²⁸ We cannot call God our Father without at least implicitly committing ourselves to the ecumenical project of restoring Christian unity. Confessing God as Father is the most basic commitment Christians can make, a commitment that will color our whole lives.

Confessing God as Father in no way implies that we believe God to be male. As we have seen, any Jewish contemporary of Jesus would have rejected that implication of calling God ‘Father.’ It is precisely against the background of Jewish misgivings about images and anthropomorphisms in relation to God that Jesus could use this audacious term. For us, this means that when the male connotations of fatherhood hinder us from being drawn into Jesus’ relationship with God, we should radically reject those connotations. God is beyond gender.²⁹

Before we turn to the question of what is meant by ‘I believe,’ let us point out a final implication of the fatherhood of God, an implication that connects the first article of the Creed (that on God the Father) to the third (that on God the Holy Spirit). Through the Spirit, we in Christ become children of the Father. However, if, by calling Jesus’ Father ‘the Father almighty’ and accepting him as also being our Father we accept our position as sisters and brothers of Jesus, then by calling God Father we also express our confidence that God, just like He loved Jesus beyond death, will also love us beyond death.³⁰ This interpretation is strongly supported by what Paul writes in Romans 8. On the one hand, he writes that whoever is led by the Spirit is a child of God (v. 14, quoted above). On the other hand, he says, ‘if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead has made his home in you [and so you are children of God, see v. 14 – MS], then he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your own

²⁸ Pope Francis, ‘Address at the World Council of Churches, 21 June, 2018. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180621_pellegrinaggio-ginevra.html.

²⁹ See Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). See also CCC 239.

³⁰ Lash, *Believing Three Ways*, 45.

mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you' (Rom. 8:11). Thus, our confession of God as Father prepares for our confession of the resurrection of the body and eternal life as brought about by the Holy Spirit.

3. What Are We Doing When We Confess Our Belief?

We have seen above that confessing the Creed is like taking a marriage vow. When one takes a marriage vow, one does not really know what one is promising: one does not know what will happen, one does not know how one's spouse or oneself will change, and one does not even know if one shall be able to do what one promises. In short: one does not know the future. And yet one promises and resolves to keep that promise. Second- and third-century Christians who confessed the Creed did so in the awareness that Jesus had been brought to death and that the same could happen to them if they persisted in their faith. For them, confessing their faith was so important that they were prepared to die for it.

One does not take a marriage vow without knowing *to whom* one plights one's troth. One would not marry anyone. That would be irresponsible. The person whom one marries must be someone special, and one must be confident that in union with this person, one shall be able to live a worthwhile life. In the case of confessing the Creed, where for early Christians the stakes were even higher, the same applies. In and through Jesus, the disciples had become aware that their ultimate happiness was dependent on their relationship to God. Jesus had, as it were, opened up his relationship to the Father so that his disciples might share it and also were allowed to call God 'Father.' He had taught them 'not [to] be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul' (Matt. 10:28), and his resurrection had convinced them that he was right. They were willing to lose their life to win it (Matt. 16:25). And when we confess the Creed we join them in this confession. 'One who says credo without willingness to suffer and, if necessary, die for the faith has not genuinely said credo in its deepest Christian sense as baptism: to die and rise again (Rom. 6).'³¹

We should make a distinction between *believing in* and *believing that*. In most cases, believing that an additional object exists does not make a difference to one's life; it is existentially irrelevant.³² This applies, for instance, when astronomers have discovered an additional planet.

³¹ Bray, *We Believe*, viii-ix.

³² Cf. D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 16-18.

Our lives will not be affected by this discovery. In some cases, however, this is different. When a man discovers that he has a child of whose existence he was up to then unaware, this will, in most cases, make a difference to his life. And many of us believe that it *should* make a difference. Contemporary philosophers have often repeated that one can never derive an ought from an is.³³ Contrary to what is often thought, however, the validity of this maxim is not universal:³⁴ if the Father of Jesus Christ exists, we *ought* to accept him as our Father. One might perhaps express this as follows: one cannot believe *that God exists* without *believing in* God. A Dutch novelist who had well understood this wrote in an autobiographical book: 'I do not believe in God. If I did believe in God, I would, of course, have become a priest.'³⁵ The apostles brought this into practice; for them, belief was life-changing. The Creed articulates the existential aspect of believing – believing in – without articulating the factual aspect: believing that. Most commentaries on the Creed, however, focus on the factual aspect: believing that God exists. We will now turn to the *meaning* of the claim that God exists.

EXCURSUS:

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE CLAIM THAT GOD EXISTS?

Talking about the 'existence' of God is problematic since we mostly use this term for objects that we can observe, objects like chairs, tables, computers, plants, animals, planets etc. *Empiricism* limits the use of the term 'existence' to what is empirically observable. Berkeley's *esse est percipi* (to exist is to be observed) is generally considered to be too strict; it would imply that things only exist when there is somebody to observe them. John Stuart Mill's explanation of existence is more plausible: to exist means to be observable by a favorably situated observer. Stars exist if one could observe them when at the right moment one had sufficiently powerful telescopes, Mary existed if one could have seen and heard her when one had been at the right moment in Nazareth or Bethlehem. Today still, this is, for many, a plausible analysis of what it means to exist. God, however, is not an

³³ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section I (pp. 469–470 in the edition by L.A. Selby-Bigge).

³⁴ For an insightful introduction to and critique of this maxim, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed. 2007), 56–61; similarly Phillips, 'God and Ought.'

³⁵ Harry Mulisch, *Mijn getijdenboek* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, ²1985), 8.

empirically observable object. And this is not an *ad hoc* argument against empiricism, but what Christians have always believed.

Does this mean that we must give up the claim that God exists? If we accept an empiricist ontology, no other conclusion is open to us. However, there are good reasons not to accept an empiricist ontology. Vincent Brümmer has pointed out that empiricist ontologies assume that human beings relate to their environment primarily by *observing* it. In practice, however, we relate in many other ways to our environment: we do not only observe it but try to influence it, manipulate it, improve it etc. Observing our environment is just one of the many ways in which we *act* in it, and we do more justice to our relationship with our environment by claiming that we are agents than by claiming that we are observers. If we apply this insight to ontology, by claiming that something exists, we are claiming 'that it determines the limits of our possibilities of action and not merely of our possibilities of perception.'³⁶ For the existence of God, this means that by claiming that God exists, we claim that we have action possibilities that we would not have if God did not exist. An example may make clear how this is the case. Imagine a man who on arriving home, assuming that his wife is there, greets her loudly: 'Hello! I'm home again!' Now there are two possibilities: either she is at home, or she is not there. When she is at home and hears him, he succeeds in telling her that he has returned home. If she is not at home, his observable behavior is the same but cannot be described as 'telling his wife that he has returned home.' That is what he intended to do but failed to do. When one prays to God, the same applies. By confessing the Creed, one intends to tell God that one commits oneself to him. Whether one succeeds in doing so depends on the question of whether God exists.

Once we have left empiricism behind, we can explain what we mean when we say that God exists: we can live our lives in a relationship with him. In this sense, the existence of God is assumed in the Creed. Nowadays, many people will require more than an explanation of the meaning of the phrase 'God exists.' They exact proofs of this existence. An explanation of the Creed, however, is not the place to discuss arguments for the existence of God. The Creed itself is not based on argument, but on (the memory of) the experiences of Jesus' disciples.

³⁶ Vincent Brümmer, 'Does God Really Exist?', in: Timo Koistinen & Tommi Lehtonen (eds.), *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics, and Ethics* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 1997), 29. The entire excursus on the existence of God is inspired by this article.

‘Words [...] take meaning from the company they keep,’ Nicholas Lash claims. It is for this reason that we have first looked at what it means that God is Father, before inquiring what it means to confess *belief* in this Father. Believing in God the Father means

- Lovingly and trustfully *expressing* one’s awareness that one is dependent on God. As the Old Testament expresses it on another occasion, where Israel is reminded of its lack of faithfulness: ‘Is this not your father, who gave you being, who made you, by whom you subsist?’ (Deut. 32:4). Jesus embodies this awareness of dependence (John 6:57, 10:32) and asks his disciples to be aware of their dependence on both the Father and himself, who are one (John 3:35, 5:23, 6:40, 10:30, 12:26, 14:9). This dependence applies not only to this life but also to the next.
- These expressives are rooted in constatives: God really resembles a father, is life-giving and is there to listen to us whatever we have to tell him. He is completely reliable.
- The expressives presuppose prescriptives: that we behave towards God as we should behave towards a completely reliable, loving parent.
- Finally and foremostly, these expressives cannot be detached from a commitment to this Father: a freely given vow to live one’s life in an intimate relationship with him, whatever the consequences may be.

4. What Are We Doing When We Are Confessing the Omnipotence of the Father?

Before we discuss God’s omnipotence, we should ask the question: should we not also have discussed this attribute before discussing *belief in* (and existence of) God? And one might even ask: should we not also have discussed ‘Creator of heaven and earth’? The main reason for not doing so is that ‘Father *almighty*’ is an expression that never occurs in the Bible³⁷ and almost never in the ante-Nicene fathers.³⁸ This counts against interpreting *patrem omnipotentem* as one expression. These are two separate words, the combination of which is not obvious. ‘God the Father’ indicates *whom* we believe in, parallel to ‘Jesus Christ’ and ‘the Holy Spirit,’ and ‘the omnipotent’ and ‘Creator of heaven and earth’ indicate *what* we believe about the Father.

³⁷ Bray, *We Believe*, xxvii.

³⁸ André de Halleux, ‘Dieu le Père tout-puissant,’ *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 8 (1977), 407–408.

Almighty takes us into another atmosphere than the intimate 'Father,' an atmosphere of more distance, respect, and transcendence. In this respect, there is a tension between 'Father,' as Jesus used it, and 'almighty,' with 'Father' indicating relatedness and 'almighty' indicating otherness. This tension, however, is not alien to the Bible. It is similar to that found in the Old Testament expression 'Holy One of Israel,'³⁹ with 'Holy One' indicating otherness, 'of Israel' indicating relatedness.⁴⁰ It is also similar to that in 'Our Father, who art in heaven,' with 'Father' indicating intimacy, 'who art in heaven' distance.⁴¹ When Jesus addressed the Father, He did not address the Father as transcendent; the Father and Jesus are one (John 10:30). But when He taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he taught them the words 'Our Father who art in heaven,' for while they were allowed to share the intimacy with the Father, for them (and for us) the Father is also transcendent. God is never immanent without also being transcendent.

While the expression 'Father almighty' does not occur in the Bible, the word 'almighty' does. It is used to translate the Hebrew terms *shaddai* and *sebaoth* and the Greek *pantokrator*. There is much discussion about the exact meaning of all three of these terms, but even if none of them would mean precisely what we mean by *al*-mighty or *omni*-potent, the Bible implicitly seems to ascribe unlimited power to God. God is Creator of heaven and earth and acts in history both in a miraculous and in a non-miraculous way all through the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus performs many miracles and is risen from the dead. As Gijsbert van den Brink has pointed out, 'phrases like "all things are possible for God" appear in virtually all layers of the biblical literature (see Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:17, Job 42:2, Matt. 19:26, Mark 14:36, Luke 1:37, Phil. 3:21, etc.)' and seem to be an apt summary of the Biblical testimony.⁴²

By confessing the omnipotence of God, therefore, do not move away from the biblical concept of God and towards metaphysical speculation, let alone that we engage in the worship of sheer power. Van den Brink notes that 'in the Bible the acknowledgment of God's omnipotence [...] functions [...] as an expression of trust based on an interpretation of

³⁹ See, e.g., 2 Kings 19:22, Psalm 71:22, Isa. 5:24.

⁴⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial Classics, 2001), 293.

⁴¹ Arjan Markus, *Beyond Finitude: God's Transcendence and the Meaning of Life* (Frankfurt aM: Peter Lang, 2004), 77, 85.

⁴² Gijsbert van den Brink, 'Capable of Anything? The Omnipotence of God,' in: Gijsbert van den Brink & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Frankfurt aM: Peter Lang, 1999), 141.

history with the eyes of faith. Throughout, the context is one of prayer and promise, of hope against hope, [...] of joy and confession.⁴³ This is also true for early sermons on the Creed, like Augustine's *Sermon* 213:1:

Let us, therefore, believe in him, and let us promise ourselves all things from his mercy, because He is omnipotent. On that account we believe in God the Father Almighty. Let no one say: 'He is not able to forgive me my sins.' How can the Omnipotent lack that power? But you say: 'I have sinned much.' I answer: 'But He is omnipotent.' You insist: 'I have committed sins of such a nature that I cannot be freed or cleansed from them.' I reply: 'But He is omnipotent. See what you sing in the psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and never forget all he hath done for thee. Who forgiveth all thy iniquities: who healeth all thy diseases."' In addition to all this, his omnipotence is necessary for us inasmuch as it was necessary for all creation in order that it might be created.⁴⁴

Augustine connects God's omnipotence in the first place with God's ability to forgive and in the second place with God's ability to create. Other patristic texts connect it with God's loving care for God's creation.⁴⁵ Though the connection of 'Father' and 'almighty' does not occur in the Bible, then, the original function of 'almighty' appears to have been to emphasize God's ability to care for his creation, and thus to underline his reliability and trustworthiness. Thus interpreted, the confession of the Almighty becomes an expression of trust in One who is so dependable that one can without hesitation commit oneself to serving him with all one has and all one is. There is another interpretation of 'Father almighty,' however, to which we will now turn our attention in an excursus.

EXCURSUS:

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF 'FATHER ALMIGHTY'

It must be noted here that in a Hellenistic environment, the expression 'Father almighty' could easily be understood in a quite different sense: that of the Creator of the world. In his classic monograph on *Early Christian Creeds*, J.N.D. Kelly has shown that the most common meaning of the term 'Father' in its application to God in the Hellenistic environment,

⁴³ Van den Brink, 'Capable of Anything?', 142.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Sermons for the Liturgical Seasons*, 121.

⁴⁵ De Halleux, 'Dieu le Père tout-puissant,' 410, 415, 417–422. Cf. Van den Brink, 'Capable of Anything?', 144–145. De Halleux also points out that the Greek term translated by *omnipotens*, *pantokrator*, can also mean *all-embracing* and is often interpreted in that sense by the church fathers.

was that of 'Creator. This was probably due to the influence of Plato's *Timaeus*, in which God is called 'the maker and father of this universe of ours.'⁴⁶ From the Hellenistic era, Kelly mentions Epictetus (50–c. 130) and Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50 CE), and he suggests that to Christians of the second century, this may well have been the primary significance of the Fatherhood of God.⁴⁷ He mentions a number of examples. Clement of Rome (c. 35–99) spoke of 'the Father and Creator of the entire world' (1 Clem. 19:2) and of 'the Maker and Father of the ages' (1 Clem. 35:3).⁴⁸ Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) spoke of God as 'the Father of all and the Creator'⁴⁹ and as 'God, the Father and Creator of all things' (*Dialogue with Trypho* 7.3). Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 140–202) mentions that God the Creator is called Father in respect of his love (*Against Heresies* V 17.1). Theophilus of Antioch († c. 185) gives as the reason for calling God Father that He 'is before all things' (*To Autolycus* I 4). Tatian (c. 120–c. 180) calls God 'the Father of both sensible and invisible things' (*Address to the Greeks* 4). Again, when Novatian (200–258) talks about God the Father, it is clear that he talks about the Creator: 'The Rule of truth requires that we should first of all things believe in God the Father and Lord Omnipotent; that is, the absolutely perfect Founder of all things, who has suspended the heavens in lofty sublimity, has established the earth with its lower mass, has diffused the seas with their fluent moisture, and has distributed all these things, both adorned and supplied with their appropriate and fitting instruments' (Novatian, *On the Trinity* 1).

More examples could be given, but these examples suffice to make it plausible that if we read the Apostles' Creed against the background of the Hellenistic culture from which it originated, the interpretation of Father as Creator becomes a natural interpretation. One of the reasons why this interpretation could so easily be adopted in the early church is that also in some of the few texts from the Hebrew Scriptures in which God was named as Father to indicate a present reality, this Fathership, in fact, meant Creatorship. We see this, for example, in Deuteronomy 32:6 NET ('Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people?

⁴⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 28c; see also 37c and 41a. Cf. De Halleux, 'Dieu le Père tout-puissant,' 411.

⁴⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 136. Cf. Norris, 'I Believe in God,' 124–125.

⁴⁸ Quotations from the apostolic fathers are taken from Bart D. Ehrman (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers* Vol. 1: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache (LCL 24; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

⁴⁹ Justin Martyr, *1st Apology* 63.11; cf. 63.15, 65.3. *2nd Apology* 5(6).1. Cf. Justin, *Philosopher and Martyr, Apologies* ed. by Dennis Minns & Paul Parvis (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 289 n. 3.

Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?') and Malachi 2:10 NET ('Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?').

If we interpret 'Father' as 'Creator', the adjective 'omnipotent' falls into place as well: the Creator of all should be omnipotent. Augustine makes this connection quite clear: '

His omnipotence [...] was necessary for all creation in order that it might be created. He is omnipotent to make things great and small; He is omnipotent to make things heavenly and earthly; He is omnipotent to make things immortal and mortal; He is omnipotent to make things spiritual and corporeal; He is omnipotent to make things visible and invisible; He is great amid great things and He is not small amid the smallest. In a word, He is omnipotent to make all things which He may have desired to make (Augustine, *Sermon* 213).⁵⁰

That the reference to the Father almighty has indeed often been interpreted as a reference to the Creator, can also be seen from the fact that from the early versions of the Apostles' Creed the phrase 'Creator of heaven and earth' is absent; it was added only after the Hellenistic era, when it was no longer self-evident that 'omnipotent Father' could mean 'Creator of heaven and earth'.⁵¹

André de Halleux explains our instinctive rejection of the interpretation of 'Father' as Creator from the fact that we interpret the Creed against the background of the trinitarian dogma. This dogma was not yet in place when the Creed emerged, however, and the Old Roman Creed was, like the baptismal formula of Matt. 28:19, *trinary* (mentioning Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) rather than trinitarian in the Nicean sense.⁵²

Regardless of whether we connect God's omnipotence with God's ability to create or not, this omnipotence is not without limits. To quote Augustine once more: 'He cannot die; He cannot sin; He cannot deceive; He cannot be deceived. Such things He cannot do; were He able to do those things, He would not be omnipotent.'⁵³ Augustine is here repeating a Biblical point of view in his own words. It is the Bible that teaches that God cannot swear by anyone higher than himself (Heb. 6:13), cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13), and cannot be tempted by

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Sermons for the Liturgical Seasons*, 121–122.

⁵¹ Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 95, 222–225.

⁵² De Halleux, 'Dieu le Père tout-puissant,' 413.

⁵³ Augustine, *Sermons for the Liturgical Seasons*, 122.

anything evil (James 1:13). The acts that God cannot perform are not acts that are in themselves impossible, nor are all of them – as Augustine seems to suggest – incompatible with power. We humans perform some of these acts daily, and there is nothing to suggest that those with more power sin or lie less. Indeed, an omnipotent but lying god is conceivable. Therefore, that God cannot lie is not because God is omnipotent. The reason God cannot lie is that lying is contrary to who God is, to God's being and character. So the 'cannot' indicates neither a logical impossibility (as in not being able to swear to a being higher than God himself; that is logically impossible since God is the supreme being), nor a factual impossibility. It is not that God lacks the ability to lie. In that case, we could not praise God for this, because we cannot praise someone for doing what he cannot fail to do. No, the impossibility at issue here is characterological: God's character is such that we may trust that He will not deny himself and will not lie.

A good analogy is that of people of whom we say that they 'just *cannot* be cruel to animals.' By this, we mean that they are '*strongly disposed* to be kind to animals.'⁵⁴ In the case of human beings, however, this 'inability' is never absolute:

There are two ways in which we could explain the fact that people act out of character. [...] They could on the one hand do so through ignorance of the situation. Thus, for example, Jones could have kicked the kitten because he mistook it for a ball of wool. On the other hand, [...] people [...] sometimes [...] fail to do what they know they should because they are prevented from doing so by some physical or psychological constraint. Thus, Jones could have been so angry at the kitten for eating the goldfish that he could not help himself kicking it.⁵⁵

God, however, is not subject to ignorance and physical or psychological constraints. Therefore we can be certain (and we may trust) that God will never act out of character. The use God will make of his omnipotence is limited by God's character only. This is a very important limitation. We are increasingly aware that among human beings, inequality of power will often lead to abuse of power; in the case of God, this is no risk. God is absolutely reliable, and therefore our trust in God can be complete. In God's case, and in God's case only, the amount of power underlines God's reliability.

⁵⁴ Nelson Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6/3 (July 1969), 215.

⁵⁵ Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 105–106.

5. What Are We Doing When We Are Confessing that God Is Creator of Heaven and Earth?

In the previous section, we have seen that however ‘Father’ was originally intended, in the early church it was often understood as ‘Creator.’ When, in the fourth century, a reference to the creatorship of God was added to the Creed, it was looked upon not as ‘an addition to the content of the Creed,’ but ‘as a specification of a truth that was already implicitly present in the Creed.’⁵⁶

The identification of the God of the Creed with the ‘Creator of heaven and earth’ makes explicit that the God confessed here is not a rival of the God of the Jews, but the same God (cf. Gen. 1:1). Thereby it confirms the teachings of Jesus, who was a Jew who addressed himself primarily to the Jews. He did not preach a new God to them but primarily announced to them the coming of the kingdom that had been announced by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 2:44) and was expected by first-century Jews.⁵⁷ For the contemporaries of Jesus, this explicit identification was hardly required, but from the time of Marcion (c. 85–c. 160) onwards Christians needed to be reminded of that.

By calling God ‘Creator,’ we make clear God is not a potter or sculptor who works with given material but a Creator, i.e., one who makes something out of nothing. There is no primal power opposed to God, no primal material available to God. This eliminates any dualism of good and evil, of heaven and earth. Here, this is emphasized even further by the addition of ‘heaven and earth’ to ‘Creator.’ The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed adds in the same line: ‘of all that is visible and invisible.’ The thought is very clearly this: all that is has been created by God. These are convictions that do not find their source in Gen. 1:1-2, where the original state was a state of chaos, into which God brought order. They were part of the Judaism of Jesus’ time and were articulated in Isaiah 44:24, Jeremiah 51:19, John 1:3, and Colossians 1:16.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Westra, *Apostles’ Creed*, 97.

⁵⁷ R.T. France, ‘Kingdom of God,’ in: Kevin Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 420–421.

⁵⁸ John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 33. For an alternative view, see David Toshio Tsumura, ‘The Doctrine of Creation ex Nihilo and the Translation of *tohu wabohu*,’ in: Akio Moriya & Gohei Hata (eds.), *Pentateuchal Traditions in the Late Second Temple Period: Proceedings of the International Workshop in Tokyo, August 28-31, 2007* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–21.

If God created everything from nothing, there was a time when there was nothing and there still could have been nothing. In other words, everything that is, is contingent (non-necessary) and is absolutely dependent on God for its coming into existence. Not only for its coming into existence, however, but also for its continued existence: ‘Yes, you love everything that exists, and nothing that you have made disgusts you, since, if you had hated something, you would not have made it. And how could a thing subsist, had you not willed it? Or how be preserved, if not called forth by you? No, you spare all, since all is yours, Lord, lover of life!’ (Wisdom 11:24–26). With a technical term, this continued dependance on God is sometimes called *continuous creation*.

The idea of continuous creation suggests that saying that God is Creator is not the same as saying that God is the (temporally)⁵⁹ first cause. A first cause is, as it were, the first link in a chain, and as such it is part of the chain. A Creator who continuously upholds the whole of creation is not a first link in the great chain of being but operates at a different level: all links in the chain are dependent on this Creator, without the Creator being part of the chain. It is the chain that is created rather than its first link. By the way, the words *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) convey the same idea. What these words suggest is that if we look at creation from within creation, we cannot find a first cause or identify the first matter. It is just there, it came ‘out of nothing.’ God, the Creator, exists on a different level, and not only the beginning but also the continued existence of creation is dependent upon God.

Confessing God as Creator is not without consequences. It implies an attitude of respect for God’s handiwork. As the quotation from Wisdom above shows, creation is a work of love. ‘Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world.’⁶⁰ But even apart from God’s love for the world God created, the very fact of creation implies certain rights of the Creator. When we speak about the creations

⁵⁹ We add ‘temporally’ here because ‘first cause’ may also be interpreted in a different way: not as the cause that of all causes is the one that is separated from us by a longer period of time than all other causes, but as the *highest and most important* cause. In that case, God might be a *causa finalis* rather than a *causa efficiens*, and this final cause might itself exist at a different level than everything else. This is the idea of Aristotle, by whom Aquinas was influenced. See Maria Liatsi, ‘Aristotle’s Departure from the Commonsense Concept of God: His Doctrine of the Prime Mover and its Relation to the Ideal Human Life,’ in: Giovanni Giorgini & Elena Irrera (eds.), *God, Religion and Society in Ancient Thought* (Baden-Baden: Academia, 2023), 229–241.

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si’* (Rome, 24 May 2015), 77.

of human beings, this is sometimes spelled out in terms of ‘ownership’ and sometimes in terms of ‘intellectual property rights.’ For God’s creation, the Bible uses the concept of stewardship, which implies that human beings have a certain responsibility towards their Creator. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses this responsibility as follows: ‘Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. [...] Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment’ (339). Confessing God as Creator implies denying consumerism, irresponsible development, environmental degradation, and global warming, and committing oneself to take action against all of these.⁶¹

6. The Father once more

Some interpretations of the Creed divide it into three articles and read it as a narrative. ‘In contemporary preaching and instruction, the most widespread presentation of the Creed is [...] probably as summarizing the plot of a drama with three acts. First, God makes the world, then we make a mess of it which God sends his Son to clean up and, thirdly, God sends his Spirit to bring us back to him through faith and sacraments and holiness.’⁶² On such an interpretation, the first article is about the Creator, the second is about the Redeemer, and the third is about the Sanctifier. In light of what we have just said about continuous creation, it is immediately clear where this goes wrong. Creation is no finished job! Nor is God ‘an agent acting in three episodes’!⁶³ There are other considerations, moreover, speaking against such an interpretation. For instance, if it were correct, one would expect the last judgment in the final article.

The trinitarian interpretation of the Creed that we are giving here runs similar risks, however. We have argued above for the legitimacy of such an interpretation while simultaneously acknowledging that the trinary

⁶¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*. On the implications of confessing God as Creator, see also Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 158–159.

⁶² Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 30.

⁶³ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 30.

structure of the Creed dates from the time before the full articulation of the trinitarian dogma at the first council of Constantinople (381). The trinitarian principle *Opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*⁶⁴ was not yet in place when the Creed was written. When we interpret the Creed as an articulation not only of what its original authors believed but of what we believe, we inevitably read it in light of this principle. The principle means that when God acts, it is never just one person of the Trinity who is acting. Invariably, when God acts, all three persons of the Trinity are involved. This does not mean, of course, that all persons of the Trinity do the same; they cooperate, but each contributes in his own way. We have difficulties putting that into words in a correct way, but if we do, we say things like that in creating, the Son and the Spirit are the Father's hands,⁶⁵ or that 'the Father creates through the Son in the Spirit.'⁶⁶ The involvement of the Spirit in Creation is suggested in the Old Testament,⁶⁷ and the involvement of the Son is clearly stated in the New Testament (John 1:1–3, Col. 1:16–17). This means that while we affirm belief in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, we should be aware of what the Apostles' Creed does *not* say, namely that the Son and the Spirit were also involved.

By the way, this applies not only to God's creating, but also to God's being almighty: it is the Trinity that is almighty, not merely the Father. This means that the complete first sentence of the Creed, read outside the context of a creed structured in a trinitarian way, suggests an interpretation in which it is about God rather than about the first Person of the Trinity. By being located within a trinitarian creed, this sentence shares in the vagueness of much of our speaking about God. In practice, we often fail to distinguish between God the Father, the first Person of the Trinity, and God *simpliciter*. The expression 'God *simpliciter*' is used to speak about God without distinguishing between the persons of the Trinity, and often without, at the moment of speaking, being aware of the fact that God is

⁶⁴ The origins of this principle are not yet entirely clear. It is associated with the Augustinian tradition and became a generally accepted axiom in East and West in the Middle Ages. See Thomas Marschler, 'Opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt: Ein Grundaxiom der Trinitätstheologie in augustinischer Tradition,' in: Benedikt Paul Göcke & Ruben Schneider (eds.), *Gottes Handeln in der Welt* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2017), esp. 79. Marschler also discusses recent criticisms of this axiom, but these do not regard the interpretation of the axiom given here.

⁶⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in various places, e.g., V 6,1.

⁶⁶ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 36.

⁶⁷ Gen. 1:2, Job 27:3, 32:8, 33:4, Psalm 33:6, 104:30; cf. John 6:36.

a Trinity. In many cases, when questioned, one would willingly admit that God is three persons in one, and one would be able to explain to whom of these one was referring. This is not to deny that in some cases, doing so would not be an easy task.

In Western theology, we often speak about *Geistvergessenheit*: in practice, the Holy Spirit often receives too little attention. From our discussion of the first article of the Apostles' Creed it appears that the Creed suffers from another, though not dissimilar, problem: *Vatervergessenheit*. The Creed mentions the Father, but all the characteristics it mentions in connection with the Father are not characteristics of the Father only but of all three persons of the Trinity. The Creed does not help us to get an idea of what is proper to the Father, except perhaps in one way: by the lack of distinction, it implicitly conveys a sense of the transcendence and otherness of the Father. This is not the place to fill this gap; that is the task for Christian discussions not of the Apostles' Creed but of the doctrine of God. However, one conclusion we may draw here is that while the structure of the creed is trinitarian, its content is not fully trinitarian. By the way, this observation also applies to our common way of speaking about God and to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Its first article may be longer, but the differences and additions do not give us additional information about what is specific to the first Person of the Trinity: 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is seen and unseen.'

Altogether, the first article of the Creed harbors a tension between a God who is totally other, exists on a different level, is distant and almighty, and the God who has become known to us as our Father, with whom we may have an intimate relationship, in whom we may trust, and to whom we may commit ourselves, with everything we have and are. This tension is prefigured in the Old Testament, for instance, when God is called the Holy One (transcendent) of Israel (but also nearby). For Christians, this tension has become most tangible in Jesus Christ, who taught us to begin our prayer with the words 'our Father,' and who, in a sense, bridged the gap. He is the subject of the second article of the Creed.

I Believe in the Incarnation of the Second Person in Jesus Christ

1. Jesus Christ

While the first article of the Creed can be confessed by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, with the second article we enter specifically Christian territory. It focuses on Jesus Christ, and it is by far the longest of the three articles of the Creed. In the Latin text, it comprises fifty of the seventy-five words of the Creed. This can be explained from the prehistory of the Creed: out of the christological and trinitarian confessions of faith in the New Testament, two established creeds must have emerged, one christological, the other trinary, which at a later stage, in the context of the baptismal liturgy, have merged.¹ As a result, the part on Jesus Christ is longer than the other two parts.

One of the most striking characteristics of the article on Jesus is that it locates Jesus in history: 'He was [...] born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. [...] On the third day he rose again.' Not only does the text locate Jesus in history, but it is also ordered chronologically. It is as if the Apostles' Creed wants to emphasize that we are not dealing with some mythical hero, but with a historical figure who lived and died in an identifiable period of history.

The name *Jesus*, a graecization of 'Joshua,' was a popular name among the Jews in the first century, but according to Matthew 1:21 this was not the reason why Jesus received this name. The angel told Joseph: 'you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' The meaning of the name, 'YHWH is salvation,' informs us about the mission of Jesus. On the one hand, it immediately establishes the continuity with the Old Testament: The God who became incarnate in Jesus is the God who revealed his name as YHWH to Moses (Ex. 3:14–15). On the other hand, it makes clear that in Jesus, YHWH is offering salvation. The message of this name is a message of salvation and hope.

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, 'The Creed and Theology,' in: Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 145–148.

Two misconceptions circulate about the word *Christ*. On the first misconception, which is found among 'ordinary believers' only, 'Christ' is a surname, family name, or second name of Jesus. In that case, the only function of 'Christ' would be to identify *the* Jesus among the many Jesuses. This misunderstanding is not found among theologians; they know that *Christ* is not a proper name but a title; it is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Messiah*. Theologians, however, are prone to a second misunderstanding. On this misunderstanding, the Jews of Jesus days were eagerly expecting the Messiah, knew what the Messiah would be like, and nevertheless inexplicably failed to recognize him when he arrived in the person of Jesus. What should have been obvious to anyone with a basic knowledge of the prophecies of the Old Testament, was missed by them: Jesus is the Messiah. They persevered in a stubborn and culpable rejection of Jesus, which ultimately led to God's rejection of the Jews. As a result of this misconception, the Christian interpretation of the Creed tends to become triumphant: we are the champions who recognized and accepted the Messiah the Jews rejected! Shame on them!

This second misunderstanding requires a slightly longer explanation. The disciples were Jews, and by calling Jesus the Christ, they expressed their belief that He was the Messiah they and other Jews had been expecting. The title 'Christ' squarely places Jesus in the Jewish tradition. To understand what early Christianity claimed about Jesus by calling him the Christ, we have to look into the Jewish expectation of the Messiah in Jesus' time. Let me briefly sketch its background. According to the Old Testament,² Israel experienced its political and religious heyday under the kingship of David, who vastly expanded Israel's territory, and his son Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem. After Solomon's death, things went wrong. David and Solomon were of the tribe of Judah, and the ten Northern tribes refused to accept Solomon's son Rehoboam as the new king. As a result, Israel was split into a Northern kingdom (Israel) under King Jeroboam with Samaria as capital and a Southern kingdom (Judah) under King Rehoboam with Jerusalem as capital. Israel finally lost its independence in 722–721, when Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians. Judah continued as a small but more or less independent state under the Davidic dynasty until 587–586, when the Babylonians occupied Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. This was the beginning of

² It need not bother us here that contemporary archeologists question the historicity of the biblical accounts of David and Solomon. See, e.g., Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. Until the exile, the dynasty of David ruled in the Southern kingdom. The fall of Jerusalem meant its downfall, and it did not recover from that. It seems, then, that God did not keep God's promise to David that after his death his son would succeed him and God would 'make his royal throne secure for ever' (2 Sam. 7:13).³ This is not the conclusion prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah drew: they announced that God 'will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness"' (Jer. 23:5–6 ESV; cf. Isa. 11:1–2.10).

So far, so good. Israelite kings were anointed and therefore the descendant of David on whom the prophets had set their hope was called the anointed one. In Hebrew: the Messiah. What Christians, who, following the New Testament, select and interpret the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah through the lens of what they know about Jesus, often do not realize, is that the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah were quite diverse. Royal, prophetic, and priestly functions were in various configurations associated with the expectation of the Messiah. By the time Jesus arrived, moreover, even the most recent texts of the Hebrew Scriptures were a century old, and most were several centuries old. More recent writings, which did not make it into the Hebrew Scriptures, had continued to develop the images of the Messiah, and popular beliefs had also developed. The expectation of the Messiah took two main forms.⁴ Firstly, there was the belief in a Messiah descended from David, who would liberate Israel from Roman liberation and restore it to its former glory. Israel would be God's own kingdom. It is obvious that Jesus, though the gospels assert that He descended from David and preached the kingdom of God, was no political leader. On one occasion, Jesus even denies the descendance from David, when He says:

'How can the scribes maintain that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, moved by the Holy Spirit, said:

³ See also 2 Sam. 23:5, Ps. 89:4.28–29.

⁴ W.R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 35–36. On the meaning of 'Messiah,' see also Marinus de Jonge, *Christology in Context: The Earliest Christian Response to Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 166–167, I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Leicester: IVP, rpt. 1979), 83–96; C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (1977; Cambridge: CUP, 1978), 31–35, Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 24–29, Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (1979; New York: Crossroad, 1991), 441–459.

The Lord declared to my Lord,
take your seat at my right hand
till I have made your enemies
your footstool.

David himself calls him Lord; in what way then can he be his son?
(Mark 12:35–37a)

Exegetes differ in opinion about what precisely is being denied here, but the most plausible explanation is that Jesus, taking David to be the author of Psalm 110:1, interprets this text as an eschatological text about the Messiah. Since David calls this Messiah ‘my Lord,’ the Messiah cannot be David’s descendant; in that case David would rather have called him ‘my son.’ Moreover, the Messiah announced here is no warrior-king: far from entering the battlefield, he will sit at God’s right hand until Godself has made his enemies his footstool. That Jesus could have denied being a warrior-king is uncontested; that he also denied being from the line of David, is more problematic, since his being so is asserted everywhere else in the Gospels. Could it be that Jesus does not deny here that is from the line of David, but that He denies that He is *merely* a descendant of David?

Secondly, for some the expectation of the messiah was rooted in Daniel’s prophecies about the Son of Man.⁵ This led to a less political form of messianic expectation: the Messiah ‘would appear at the end-time to judge the world, punish the wicked and vindicate the righteous.’⁶ The first Christians, probably inspired by Jesus himself, used both the title of the Son of Man and that of Messiah to express what they believed about Jesus. The fact that belief in the Messiah and the Son of Man was so pluriform, enabled the disciples to pick and choose, and to let their expectations be corrected by the reality they experienced in Jesus. ‘All the existing models were bound to break down if and when they were applied to Jesus.’⁷ They used the most appropriate titles available to them – Messiah, Son of Man – and qualified these by calling Jesus also the Son of God⁸ and ascribing a divine status to him by using the title *kurios*.⁹ It should

⁵ De Jonge, *Christology in Context*, 169–172, Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 65–97, Marshall, *Origins of New Testament Christology*, 63–82, Moule, *Origin of Christology*, 11–22, O’Collins, *Christology*, 62–65, Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 459–472.

⁶ Telford, *Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, 36.

⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 472. See also O’Collins, *Christology*, 27.

⁸ De Jonge, *Christology in Context*, 167–169, Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 12–64, Marshall, *Origins of New Testament Christology*, 111–125, Moule, *Origin of Christology*, 22–31, O’Collins, *Christology*, 119–140.

⁹ Marshall, *Origins of New Testament Christology*, 97–110, Moule, *Origin of Christology*, 35–46, O’Collins, *Christology*, 141–145.

not come as a surprise, then, that most of the Jews did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah. The expectations associated with the Messiah were too diverse to make agreement on the identification possible, and Jesus did not entirely match any of the existing expectations.

It is as if the disciples are claiming that Jesus was everything they expected – *and more*. Since Jesus *exceeded* their expectations, the project of explaining the Creed does not require a precise explanation of these expectations. What we need is, rather, some idea of the faith they expressed when they called Jesus the *Christ*. The bottom line of it is this: the disciples claimed by means of the most appropriate, thoroughly Jewish, concepts available to them that Jesus was (in Edward Schillebeeckx's terms) 'the eschatological prophet of the rule of God for men's salvation.'¹⁰

While contemporary believers take 'Christ' either as a proper name or as a title that does not mean much to them but serves to criticize the Jews, the disciples, by calling Jesus the Christ, made a positive claim about Jesus and did so from an unmistakably Jewish perspective. It is important that 21st-century Christians make this positive claim about Christ their own, and not the implicit criticism of the Jews that is nowadays often connected with this title. In other words, when we confess that Jesus is the Christ, we are doing no more – but also no less – than answering John the Baptist's question ('Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?' Matt. 11:3) with: 'It is He!'

As to the positive claim that Jesus is the eschatological prophet of the rule of God for men's salvation, this confirms what we have seen above when we discussed the Fatherhood of God: by his claims about God the Father, Jesus claimed that a Jewish expectation concerning the *eschatata* (the last things) had been fulfilled, in other words, that the *eschaton* (the end of history) had begun. The first Christians did not expect this *eschaton* to last long; they expected the second coming of Christ within one generation. This means that they believed themselves to be the final generation of human beings living on earth before the second coming of Christ. This expectation was disappointed,¹¹ and it is inevitable that when *we* twenty centuries later confess Christ to be the eschatological prophet of the rule of God's salvation, we no longer confess belief in the imminent return of Christ. We do still confess, however, that the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus brought about a fundamental turn in history. With Jesus, humanity entered a decisive new era of history.

¹⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 485–486.

¹¹ Amos N. Wilder, 'The Eschatology of Jesus in Recent Criticism and Interpretation,' *The Journal of Religion* 28/3 (July 1948), 180.

Much has been said and written about the change that took place in and through Jesus, and we cannot presume to discuss this issue fully here. One aspect of the new era arriving in and through Jesus, however, is this: in and through Jesus the salvation available to the Jews as God's chosen people became available to all humanity. For the gentiles, observing the Jewish religious law had no part in this opening up of salvation, but Jesus did make the radical moral consequences some of the Old Testament prophets drew from the law his own when teaching his disciples. Living in accord with the spirit of the law means accepting the rule of God. The coming of the kingdom of God that was central to the message of Jesus becomes a reality to the extent that we allow God to rule our own lives. By confessing Jesus as the Christ, we open ourselves to this rule of God, in the expectation that at some stage in the future, God will transform the world in which we now live and gain full dominion over it. Then, in some mysterious way, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

A second aspect of this new era is this: the Hebrews of the Old Testament had no full-fledged belief in the resurrection of the dead. During most of the Old Testament era, the Hebrews believed that after death, human beings went to *sheol*, the dwelling place where the deceased were supposed to lead a shadowy existence, a 'land of darkness and shadow dark as death, where dimness and disorder hold sway, and light itself is like dead of night' (Job 10:21–22), a place where one is cut off from God (Ps. 88:3–5). Only in the latest parts of the Old Testament do we find belief in the resurrection of the dead, but in Jesus' time this was not generally accepted. The Sadducees rejected it. Jesus, however, taught the resurrection of the dead and, by that and by rising from the dead himself, convinced his followers. Christianity accepted the belief in a general resurrection in response to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We will come back to this below when we discuss the final clauses of the Creed.

Summing up, by confessing one's faith in Jesus Christ, one places oneself in a tradition that began with Judaism, and one accepts the God of the Jews as one's own God, a God who in Jesus has offered salvation to all humanity, salvation even beyond death. By confessing Jesus as the Christ one says that one's deepest dreams have been fulfilled in him. It needs no further argument that such a confession implies a commitment as well. As Jürgen Moltmann has remarked, one cannot confess faith in Christ without becoming his disciples.¹²

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 41.

2. His Only Son, Our Lord

Part of what we confess when we confess that Jesus is the Son of God, we have already discussed above when we discussed what it means to call God 'Father.' There, we explained that addressing God as 'Father' was a distinguishing characteristic of Jesus. By thus addressing God, Jesus expressed a 'sense of sonship.'¹³ This does not imply, however, 'a consciousness of divinity, a consciousness of a sonship rooted in pre-existent relationship with God.'¹⁴ If that were the case, we could not by the Spirit be conformed to the image of the Son, so that we may with Christ be children of the Father (Rom. 8:29).

That by calling Jesus the Son we do not merely say something about his relationship to the Father during his life on earth, however, but also about his relationship with the Father before his birth in Bethlehem, is very much part of the traditional Christian understanding of 'Son of God.' The root of this conviction goes back to the Gospel of John. In this Gospel, Jesus makes it very clear that He existed with his Father before the incarnation ('before Abraham ever was, I am' – 8:58). Moreover, on various occasions, this pre-existence is connected with the Father-Son relationship: 'What I speak of is what I have seen at my Father's side' (8:38), 'Yet to someone whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world you say, "You are blaspheming" because I said, "I am Son of God"' (10:36; cf. 17:5). Here it is asserted that the Son was Son of God even before the incarnation. The Son is the Word that was with God in the beginning (John 1:2.14). Though this does not yet imply a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity, it does suggest a divine status of the Son and something like a 'binity' (a God existing in two Persons) at least. Moreover, it is certainly consistent with belief in a Trinity, and that is how, of course, the confession of Jesus as the Son of God has, throughout the tradition, been understood.

The term 'only' – his *only* Son – is a translation of the Latin *unicus*. This, in turn, is a translation of the Greek *monogenes*. This Greek term is used in the earliest form of the Apostles' Creed that we still have, which is in Greek. It can be found in a letter from Marcellus of Ancyra (±285–374; letter ±341).¹⁵ It is a Biblical term, but its application to Jesus is restricted to the Johannine writings: John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18, 1 John 4:19. In John 3:18 we even find the exact phrase of the Creed: 'the only-begotten

¹³ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 28.

¹⁴ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 28; cf. 22–29.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 103–104.

Son of God.’ From the use of this term for other persons than Jesus – for the only son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12) and for Isaac, the only son of Abraham (Hebr. 11:17) – we can see that the term is used for an only son; thus, *unicus* and *only* are good translations. In the Johannine writings, however, it is used to underline the *uniqueness* of Jesus. The difference between Jesus and other children of the Father is not that Jesus is literally God’s Son while others are so only in a figurative sense. Whenever God is spoken of as Father, a metaphor is used: God is not a Father as other fathers are fathers, and so Jesus is not a Son as other sons are sons.

One difference between the way in which Jesus is Son of the Father and the way in which other human beings are sons of their fathers is that other sons come into existence *after* their fathers. As the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed phrases it, Jesus is ‘eternally begotten’ of the Father, which means both that He is co-eternal with the Father and that He is in some way *dependent on the Father*. It is the Father who enables Jesus to be the Son, not the other way around. Other human beings are *dependent on Jesus* for being children of God: as Son he enables us to be God’s children.¹⁶ In the words of John: ‘God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him’ (1 John 4:9; cf. John 3:16, 18 and Rom. 8:14–16, 29). This also implies that when other human beings are children of God, they are so because they have become so. Unlike Jesus’ being Son of God, their being children of God has a beginning: they have been adopted (Rom. 8:15).

By confessing Jesus as ‘his only Son,’ then, we confess that Jesus is God, and existed with the Father before He became incarnate. Our being children of God is qualitatively different from Jesus being the Son of God. It is dependent on that and allows us to have a relationship with the Father that is in some respects like that of Jesus: we may, at least to a certain extent, share his intimacy with the Father. When doing so, however, we remain human, while Jesus was not merely human, but also divine.

What does ‘our Lord’ add to ‘his only Son’? We have seen above that the term *kurios* is used to ascribe divine status to Jesus.¹⁷ Literally, it means ‘Lord’; in the Septuagint, it is used to translate *Adonai*. When after the Babylonian exile the Hebrews gradually stopped pronouncing

¹⁶ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 28. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 25 shows that the Gospel of John uses the Greek term *huios* (son) for Jesus only, *tekna* (children) for his disciples.

¹⁷ See above, 50, and see also Marshall, *Origins of New Testament Christology*, 97–110, Moule, *Origin of Christology*, 35–46, O’Collins, *Christology*, 141–145.

the name of God, YHWH, they substituted *Adonai*. *Adonai* is the word pronounced by Jews when the Bible text has YHWH, the name of God. That *Adonai* should be read is indicated by the vowels of *Adonai* that are added to the consonants of YHWH; the term 'Jehovah' is the result of a later misunderstanding of this practice.¹⁸

When Jesus is addressed or referred to as *kurios* in the New Testament and the Apostles' Creed, the identification of *kurios* with God resonates. Whoever calls Jesus 'Lord' identifies Jesus with YHWH. This applies, for instance, to Thomas, who exclaimed 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28) when Jesus also appeared to him and invited him to place his fingers in his wounds. It is obvious that in this confession, which may be inspired by the Greek (LXX) text of Hos. 2:25 (2:23 LXX), 'my Lord' and 'my God' have the same meaning. The confession of Jesus as Lord is among the oldest Christian confessions. It can be found not only in the gospels but also in the letters of Paul: 'If you declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and if you believe with your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved' (Rom. 10:9; cf. Phil. 2:11; 1 Cor. 12:3). James Dodds draws attention to the fact that, while *kurios* is a translation of YHWH, this term brings with it a meaning of its own: Lordship has to do with *dominion*. A lord is always lord *over something*; lords rule over a domain.¹⁹ Confessing Jesus as Lord is not equivalent to a neutral observation that this person is divine; by accepting Jesus as Lord, one gives him full authority over one's life. This is emphasized even further by the possessive pronoun 'our': 'our Lord.'

So far, the confession of Jesus as 'our Lord' seems to confirm that of him as 'his only Son.' Both assert the divine status of Jesus, though 'his only Son' focuses on his relation to the Father and 'our Lord' on his relation to us.²⁰ Moreover, confessing Jesus as Lord gives Jesus full authority over one's life. This does not yet explain, however, why here, for the first and also for the only time in the Apostles' Creed, the text switches from the first-person singular to the first-person plural: *our* Lord, not *my* Lord. We have seen above²¹ that the fact that the Apostles' Creed is in the first-person singular is because it is a baptismal creed: baptizands have to

¹⁸ Jacob A. Loewen, 'The Names of God in the Old Testament,' *The Bible Translator* 35 (1984), 204–205.

¹⁹ James Dodds, *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, [1896]), 34–35.

²⁰ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Dogmatische brieven* (Amsterdam; H.J. Paris, 1955), 66.

²¹ 4.

confess *their own* beliefs. Applied to Jesus' Lordship, a baptizand must confess that Jesus is his or her Lord. Why, then, do we confess that Jesus is *our* Lord?

In this connection, J.N.D. Kelly notes that Paul speaks in Phil. 3:8 of 'my Lord,' but in Rom. 15:30, 16:18, and 1 Cor. 1:2 of 'our Lord.'²² From Lieuwe Westra's survey of the development of the Creed, it becomes clear that there are variants of the Apostles' Creed without 'our Lord,' but not with 'my Lord.'²³ A small search in early Christian literature suggests that 'our Lord' is much more common than 'my Lord.' But this still does not explain why. Here again, James Dodds puts forward a helpful suggestion: 'The plural form here indicates that while in following Jesus we are separated from the world, we are gathered into the fellowship of the saints, and are members of the whole family in heaven and earth.'²⁴ It certainly is true that by accepting Christ as our Lord, we become part of a larger community, and that this community supports our faith. What this explanation fails to explain, however, is why, only in this case, the Creed switches to the plural. By the same argument, the twice repeated 'I believe' should also be 'we believe.'

Therefore, we prefer an alternative explanation. The Dutch theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw suggests that we interpret 'our Lord' from an eschatological perspective²⁵ and illustrates what he means by an analogy that sits well with our own overall approach to the Creed as analogous to marriage vows: 'When a man addresses his beloved by the most exalted names, he says more than he can justify and more than she actually is. So is he speaking untruth? That need not be the case. He is speaking eschatologically, i.e., he speaks correctly, but what he means will only become apparent when everything that was hidden is revealed. [...] He who speaks to his bride seeks to expose the depths of his life, which is more than "reality."²⁶ Van der Leeuw here distinguishes between potentiality and actuality: When in love, we see in our loved ones more than they actually are: we see the potential good in them, the possibilities for good that are hidden in them, the good core that must be actualized. By identifying with this potential good, moreover, we help to draw this good out, to make the potential good actual. Our commitment to the good in our loved ones helps them to develop their hidden talents.

²² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 143.

²³ Westra, *Apostles' Creed*, 66, 539–562.

²⁴ Dodds, *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*, 36.

²⁵ Van der Leeuw, *Dogmatische brieven*, 68.

²⁶ Van der Leeuw, *Dogmatische brieven*, 69.

Van der Leeuw uses this dynamic to explain what it means for us to confess Jesus Christ as ‘our Lord.’ When we believe, Jesus is our Lord. On closer inspection, however, this is only a partial truth: ‘If we call Jesus “Lord,” we are saying something we cannot account for. For He is our “Lord” only very partially. We have many other masters, not least ourselves. His rule [...] seems only moderately extended. One does not care much about Him, neither we nor others. Yet, in faith, we call Jesus “our Lord.” And we say so correctly. For we thereby refer to the hidden secret [...] of our souls.’²⁷ In other words, if we take our confession of Jesus as ‘our Lord’ as a factual statement, it is only partially true. In practice, He rules neither the whole of our lives nor the whole of our church. That is why we need to interpret this confession eschatologically: we confess our faith that, in the end, Jesus *shall* rule the whole of our lives and the whole of the church. Perhaps we can, building on his own analogy of bridal love, take one further step and suggest that this confession expresses not only an expectation of how things *shall* be but also a commitment to help make this true. When we confess Jesus as our Lord, we offer ourselves to Jesus, ask him to rule over our lives, and to use these to further his rule over the Church and, eventually, the world. On this interpretation of ‘our Lord,’ we can understand why it is precisely here that the text switches to the first-person plural: the coming of God’s kingdom requires God to become not only my Lord, but *our Lord*, and we commit ourselves to making this happen (or, perhaps better, letting this happen).

3. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Born of the Virgin Mary

In the Creed, we confess the incarnation – a term that is not used in the Apostles’ Creed – by the juxtaposition of two clauses: ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’ and ‘born of the virgin Mary.’ This juxtaposition is no coincidence: it is a meaningful juxtaposition.²⁸ The historical development of the Creed helps to shed light on this. The clause *qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine* (‘who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’) was adapted from an older formulation in the old Roman baptismal creed *qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto et Maria Virgine*. It is not difficult to understand why this older formulation was replaced; it seems to place the Holy Spirit and Mary on the same

²⁷ Van der Leeuw, *Dogmatische brieven*, 69.

²⁸ We would like to thank our colleague Prof. Henk Schoot for bringing this to our attention.

level and it might even be misunderstood as implying intercourse between the Holy Spirit and Mary.²⁹ This, of course, was never intended, and the new formulation avoids this suggestion while retaining the basic idea 'that Jesus Christ, the historic Son of God, was the product of the union of divine spirit with human nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin.'³⁰ This 'double origin' of Jesus – both divine and human – points to the two natures of Christ: divine and human.³¹ The revised wording of the Creed – *conceived* by the Holy Spirit, *born* of the virgin Mary – makes quite clear that the roles of the Holy Spirit and Mary are not the same.

One may wonder why it is the Spirit who is mentioned here. Why not the Father, and why not the Son? Is not the Father the one who, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, generates the Son? And is not the Son the one who becomes incarnate? In reply to these questions, we should first point out that the *eternal* generation is something different from the incarnation; the incarnation had a beginning in time, but the eternal generation did not. Besides, in Luke 1:35, the Spirit – and not the Father or the Son – is mentioned in connection with the virgin birth. Moreover, the fact that it is the Spirit who is mentioned in connection with the virgin birth once more underlines that the role of God in the conception of Jesus was not that of a father. The role of the Spirit was *spiritual*. However, the fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit does not mean that it was the Spirit who became incarnate in Christ. Some may have interpreted the Apostles' Creed in that way before the classical formulation of the trinitarian dogma,³² but in light of this dogma, that interpretation is no longer open to us.

In the early 21st century, many find it difficult to believe that Jesus was fully divine and believe instead that He was an exemplary human being. Denying the humanity of Jesus is no longer a live option. None claim that Jesus was fully divine and that He merely looks human, 'as ghosts and angels might do.'³³ In the early church, however, both docetic and gnostic Christologies denied the full humanity of Jesus. While we are inclined

²⁹ Jan Hendriks, 'Born of the Virgin Mary,' in: Archibald van Wieringen & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Born of the Virgin Mary*, in preparation for publication.

³⁰ John N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968), 144–145.

³¹ Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed and its Early Christian Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 45. Cf. *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (381), Faith & Order Paper 153 (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 54.

³² Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 148–149.

³³ Packer, *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*, 74.

to understand the virgin birth as affirming that Jesus was not merely human, 'the express mention of' the virgin birth 'in the text of the Creeds was probably due in the first instance to the need to affirm that the Son of God was really born of a human mother.'³⁴ By asserting the conception by the Holy Spirit, the Creeds also target the other main Christological heresy of the early church, adoptionism.³⁵ According to adoptionism, Jesus was not conceived as the Son of God but adopted as such at his baptism, his resurrection, or his ascension. If He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, there is no need to assume such a later adoption.³⁶

The confession of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit and birth of the virgin Mary does not serve primarily to emphasize the special status of Mary. From a Biblical perspective, it serves to underline the divine initiative leading to Mary's pregnancy. This pregnancy is not a human achievement but a divine act! There are theological allusions in Luke 1:35 both to creation and to the Pentecost. The Spirit overshadowing Mary is the *ruach* that is present at creation (Gen. 1:2), and the coming of the Spirit over Mary finds its parallel in the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. This is underlined by the Greek verb *eperchomai*, which is used in Luke 1:35 to denote the coming of the Spirit over Mary, and in Acts 1:8 for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.³⁷ Like in the earlier miraculous births in the history of Israel's salvation (Isaac in Genesis 17; Samson in Judges 13; Samuel in 1 Samuel 1; John the Baptist in Luke 1), in the birth of Jesus God begins a new chapter in the history of salvation. As the analogies of creation and Pentecost show, however, Jesus' birth is novel at another level than these earlier miraculous births. These earlier births constitute new beginnings *in creation*, and Jesus' birth is more like *a new creation*. That Jesus' miraculous birth is new at another level than previous miraculous births mirrors, we might perhaps say, that in Jesus, we also arrive at a new level in salvation history. In the Old Testament, salvation history primarily focuses on the relationship between God and Israel. There are obvious universalist³⁸ tendencies already in the Old Testament,

³⁴ Oliver C. Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed: Their Basis in Scripture and their Meaning To-day* (1938; rpt. London: Nisbet & Co, 1947), 139. Cf. Gal. 4:4 'born of a woman,' which had the same function.

³⁵ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 147.

³⁶ Cf. Manfred Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 173, 182–183.

³⁷ Hendriks, 'Born of the Virgin Mary.'

³⁸ I use 'universalism' here in contrast with 'nationalism.' Universalism is directed at the salvation of all nations, nationalism at the salvation of Israel only. For this use of 'universalism,' see, e.g., A. Gelston, 'Universalism in Second Isaiah,' *The Journal of Theological Studies* 43/2 (Oct. 1992), 377–398.

where Israel is called a 'light to the nations',³⁹ but in the New Testament – and the new covenant – this universalism is taken to a new level, and Christ himself becomes a light to the nations, a conclusion that is explicitly drawn in *Lumen gentium* 1.

Gerhard Müller has argued that Mary's relation to God in the reception of the Logos should not be understood as an analogy of a husband-wife relationship but, rather, as a Creator-creature relationship.⁴⁰

EXCURSUS:

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARIOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY

We should not be surprised that the Creed uses a claim about Mary to make a claim about Christ. This is what happens in all the Marian dogmas, so why should it not happen here? When the dogma asserts that Mary was the *Theotokos* (which is traditionally translated as 'Mother of God' but literally means 'God-bearer'), it asserts that Jesus is God and that the divine and human in Jesus cannot be separated; they are present from his birth (and even his conception). When the dogma asserts the immaculate conception of Mary, it asserts that our salvation through Jesus is not due to a human achievement (Mary's 'Let it happen to me as you have said'), but is the result of divine grace (which enabled Mary to say this by allowing her to be born free from original sin).⁴¹ In fact, one could say that the immaculate conception is the Catholic equivalent of the Protestant *Sola gratia*. Also, when the dogma asserts that Mary was taken up into heaven, body and soul, it asserts that God cannot fail to complete the salvation He has begun in Mary (by her immaculate conception). One could say that the dogma of the assumption of Mary into heaven is the Catholic equivalent to the Calvinist doctrines of the irresistibility of grace and the perseverance of the saints. When the dogma asserts that Mary gives birth as a virgin, it asserts the full humanity of Jesus as well as God's initiative, which makes this human being (Jesus) so special.⁴² Mariology is always also Christology and touches on many points of anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

³⁹ Isa. 42:6, 49:6; cf. Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 72007).

⁴⁰ Gerhard L. Müller, *Was heißt: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria? Eine theologische Deutung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 70.

⁴¹ Müller, *Was heißt: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria?*, 46.

⁴² Cf. CCC 503.

This being said, when the Apostles' Creed asserts the virgin birth, it also says something about Mary. In the words of the Anglican theologian Oliver C. Quick:

There is the almost unbroken and universal tradition of the Church from the second century down to modern times that the Virgin Birth is an integral part of the faith. [...] There is the importance that reverence for the Blessed Virgin has for Christian devotion. Her perpetual virginity is recognized as an article of faith by the main body of the Catholic Church; and to the piety of many, perhaps of most, devout Christians, it seems quite intolerable to permit it to be questioned.⁴³

Quick mentions both the 'Virgin Birth' and Mary's 'perpetual virginity,' as if they were the same. They are not, however. Mary's perpetual virginity includes her virginity at three stages of her life:

- (1) *Virginitas ante partum*: Virginity before Jesus' birth. This means that Mary's virginity was not lost by Jesus' conception because it was not the result of sexual activity.
- (2) *Virginitas in partu*: Virginity during Jesus' birth. This means that Mary remained a virgin even while giving birth to Jesus.
- (3) *Virginitas post partum*: Virginity after Jesus' birth. According to the tradition, Mary retained her virginity for the remainder of her life.⁴⁴

The Creed claims that Jesus was 'born of the Virgin Mary' without saying anything about whether Mary remained a virgin thereafter. The interest of the Creed is Christological, not Mariological: it focuses on the birth of Jesus. Mary's perpetual virginity is part of the tradition, but not of the Creed. From the wording of the Creed, it is not even clear whether Mary remained a virgin while giving birth. Does 'born of the Virgin' mean that Mary was a virgin when labor began, or does it also imply that she remained a virgin while giving birth? Since the acceptance of the perpetual virginity of Mary was widespread already when the old Roman Creed developed, we may assume, however, that the somewhat vague wording of the Apostles' Creed was used because, at that time, no one disputed that the virgin conception was followed by a virgin birth.

The belief in Mary's virginity during the conception of Jesus is primarily based on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Luke introduces Mary as a virgin (Luke 1:27) and has her say, 'But how can this come about, since

⁴³ Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed*, 158–159. Similarly: Müller, *Was heißt: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria?*, 24–26.

⁴⁴ Müller, *Was heißt: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria?*, 23 *et passim*; Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology*, 172–207.

I have no knowledge of man?’ (1:34), which means that she expects no sexual intercourse with a man in the near future. As Bultmann has noted, this question seems ‘an absurd one for a bride’⁴⁵ given that, ordinarily, a bride would expect to have intercourse. It is obvious that in Luke’s story, Mary’s question and the angel’s answer – ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow’ (1:35) – belong together. In combination, question and answer state that this conception was not due to intercourse, but to an ‘overshadowing’ by the Holy Spirit. Does Mary’s question implicitly refer to a vow of chastity she had made? Many have argued that against the background of the Old Testament, this seems most unlikely.⁴⁶ On the other hand, some of Jesus’ sayings in the gospels (e.g., Matt. 19:12) and Paul’s remarks in his letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 7) reflect a very different atmosphere. Could it be that this change in atmosphere began before the birth of Jesus and is reflected in Luke 1?

The Gospel of Matthew also writes at some length about the virgin conception. Matthew 1:18–25 states: Mary was pregnant ‘through the Holy Spirit’ (18; cf. 20); Joseph played no role in this (19). Moreover, the prophecy of Isa. 7:14 is applied to Mary (‘the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son’) (23). Finally, the text states once more: ‘he [Joseph] had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth to a son’ (25).

The Gospels according to Mark and John do not explicitly refer to the virgin conception, unless one reads with some ancient manuscripts John 1:12–13 as follows: ‘But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God – to those that believe on the name of him who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.’⁴⁷ If one reads the text in this way, Jesus was born not through sexual intercourse but by divine intervention (‘was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God’). Most scholars, however, argue that the singular ‘was born’ is a later revision of the original plural ‘were born.’ Hence, the translation becomes: ‘But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of

⁴⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York; Harper & Row, 1963), 295.

⁴⁶ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 349. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 34.

⁴⁷ This translation is by William Temple, *Readings in St John’s Gospel: First and Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 9. The authoritative *Jerusalem Bible* – as opposed to the *New Jerusalem Bible* – also reads the text this way.

the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.' In that case, the text is not about Jesus, but about his followers. Nevertheless, even then the imagery is taken from the virgin conception, which is obviously presupposed here.⁴⁸

Thus it seems that on the basis of the gospels, one should accept the virgin birth. However, many contemporary exegetes disagree. Their main arguments are the following.⁴⁹ The most important argument is based on *literary genre*: the genre of the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke would make clear that these stories do not narrate historical facts. The problem with this position is that exegetes are divided on the genre of these texts. Are they legends, myths, haggadah, midrash? It is clear that these stories have a kerygmatic purpose: they interpret historical facts from a believers' perspective. This kerygmatic perspective does not exclude historical facts, though, but needs them. It is, therefore, impossible to exclude historicity on the basis of genre. A second, related argument is based on the fact that the Gospel writers would have lacked *historical consciousness*; they lived before the historical revolution. However, while the biblical writers did not have a post-Enlightenment historical perspective and were not historians in the modern sense of the term, the distinction between fact and fiction, what had and had not happened, was available to and important for them. A third argument is based on *the silence of large parts of the New Testament* on the virgin birth. Arguments *e silentio* are notoriously inconclusive, however; the reasons for silence can be many. A fourth argument is based on *the pre-existence of Christ* as found in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. While pre-existence and virgin birth do not appear together in the New Testament and have their origins in distinct traditions, there is no logical contradiction

⁴⁸ Temple, *Readings*, 12: 'The plural verb has far the greater weight of authority in the manuscripts. Yet the sense is the same. Nothing can explain the quite peculiar phrasing of this passage except the supposition that it refers to the Virgin Birth of our Lord.' This is also the position of Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, 12.

⁴⁹ For the following, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Guus Labooy, 'De historiciteit van de maagdelijke ontvangenis: Een oefening in argumentatie,' *Kerk en Theologie* 54 (2003), 293–309; Harmen Jansen, 'De maagdelijke geboorte: Kanttekeningen bij G.H. Labooy's oefening in historische oordeelsvorming,' *Kerk en Theologie* 56 (2005), 196–203; Guus Labooy, 'Een pleidooi voor schone vishaakjes: Antwoord aan Harmen Jansen,' *Kerk en Theologie* 56 (2005): 204–208; Müller, *Was heißt: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria?*, 26–62; Wolfgang Beinert, *Heute von Maria reden? Kleine Einführung in die Mariologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), 88–97.

between both.⁵⁰ A final argument is based on *parallel motifs in other religions*. There are such motifs in Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, and many more parallels were available in the Hellenistic world. Some have suggested that the virgin birth is a motif copied from other religions, but Christians tend to interpret the parallels as a preparation for the Gospel and to use them to throw into relief the uniqueness of the virgin birth of Jesus. Here, again, conflicting interpretations are possible. Altogether, there is no knockdown argument against accepting the factual basis of belief in the virgin birth.⁵¹

As far as the Gospel of John is concerned, one might even argue that John 1:12–13 does not refer to the virgin conception only, but also to the virgin birth: ‘born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.’ If we accept the majority reading of John 1:13 and assume that this text is about the rebirth of those who become Christians, it seems natural to connect it to the story of Nicodemus in John 3. ‘You must be born from above,’ Jesus says to Nicodemus (John 3:7). Together, these texts assume that Jesus’ own birth was also ‘from above,’ in other words, was a virgin birth.⁵²

It must be admitted that in Scripture, the *virginitas in partu* is only alluded to in ambiguous terms, if at all. This is different in an early apocryphal gospel: the Gospel of James (*Protevangelium Jacobi* 19–20). There, the story is told of the midwife Salome, who would not believe the virgin birth until she herself had examined Mary’s genitals with her hand. When she has done so, her hand withers. Fortunately, an angel appears and advises her to touch the child with her withered hand. Thus, she is healed. On the one hand, this second-century apocryphal gospel, which enjoyed a certain popularity in the early church, indicates that a *virginitas in partu* was assumed already in the second century. On the other hand, this gospel has not remained apocryphal without reason; the story has an obviously legendary character and, in it, the miraculous-biological receives too much attention. Even if the way in which belief in a virgin birth is presented here is rather awkward to our twenty-first-century taste, this apocryphal gospel shows that the belief was there. In later times, this belief would take various forms, from extremely miraculous – e.g., the *conceptio per aurem* or *birth*

⁵⁰ On this issue, see also Otto Knoch, ‘Maria in der Heiligen Schrift,’ in: Wolfgang Beinert & Heinrich Petri (eds.), *Handbuch der Marienkunde* Vol. 1, (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1996), 75.

⁵¹ Nor are there, apart from faith, knockdown arguments in favour of it. For a similar position, see Wolfgang Beinert, ‘Die mariologischen Dogmen und ihre Entfaltung,’ in: Beinert & Petri (eds.), *Handbuch der Marienkunde* Vol. 1, 317–322.

⁵² Cf. Hendriks, *Maria*, 51.

through Mary's ear – to almost purely spiritual.⁵³ The more spiritual interpretations build on the fact that the New Testament does not provide much reason to assume a miraculous birth. Moreover, there are theological reasons for supposing that Jesus' birth was an ordinary *birth*: *Quod non est assumptum, non est sanatum*. What has not been assumed, has not been healed.⁵⁴ This does not detract from Mary's virginity: because Mary did not have sex, she would still be a virgin.

EXCURSUS:

THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEXUALITY

In the past, the assertion of the virgin birth was often connected with the association of sex and sin. This association was made in at least three ways:

- 1) From Augustine onwards, it was often believed that the guilt of original sin was transmitted from one generation to the next by sexual intercourse. For those Christians who did not believe in the immaculate conception of Mary (a belief that was first asserted only after the virgin birth had become generally accepted and became a dogma only in the nineteenth century), belief in the virgin birth enabled them to believe in the sinlessness of Christ.
- 2) Sexual intercourse was sometimes seen as an effect of original sin and perpetual virginity as the state God had intended for humanity prior to the Fall. The biological ramifications of this view may not be entirely clear, but the theological belief was there. This view was intricately connected with the celibate form of life as practiced by religious sisters and monks, who interpreted celibacy as an emulation of God's intentions for Adam and Eve.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Stefano De Fiores, 'Maria in der Geschichte von Theologie und Frömmigkeit,' in: Beinert & Petri (eds.), *Handbuch der Marienkunde* Vol. 1, 117, 130, 154–155. The *conceptio per aurem* is discussed on 154. Hildegard of Bingen claimed that Jesus left Mary's womb not through her vagina, but through her side. See also Eva De Visscher, 'Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Later Middle Ages,' in: Sarah J. Boss (ed.), *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007), 191–192. Beinert, 'Die mariologischen Dogmen und ihre Entfaltung,' 316–317 argues that the magisterial teaching on the *virginitas in partu* does not include gynaecological details; cf. Hendriks, *Maria*, 48, 50.

⁵⁴ Beinert, 'Die mariologischen Dogmen,' 320, 327.

⁵⁵ Dries J.L.A. De Crom, 'The Virgin Birth in the Theology of John Damascene,' in: Van Wieringen & Sarot (eds.), *Born of the Virgin Mary*; De Visscher, 'Marian Devotion in the Latin West,' 190–192.

- 3) The Virgin Mary became, by virtue of her virginity, a 'symbol of the pure and unblemished church.'⁵⁶

It is obvious that today, these three associations between sex and sin are no longer culturally available to us in the West. It has become medically possible for women to become pregnant without having intercourse. However, no one who believes in original sin believes that *in vitro* fertilization avoids the transmission of original sin. Moreover, contemporary biology asserts that there has been no original state in which human beings were asexual. There has never been a 'primeval state of virginity'⁵⁷ or asexuality.⁵⁸ In our Western culture, we believe that human beings, even if they live in celibacy, are thoroughly sexual beings and cannot avoid being so. Finally, apart from the fact that we no longer equate sex with sin, we also no longer believe that the Church is 'pure and unblemished' in the sense of sinless. In recent years, the abuse scandals within the Roman Catholic Church and various other churches, and the nationalist tendencies in ecclesiastical discussions on war and peace, have made it clear that this is not the case.⁵⁹ Even though we can see how some of our forebears connected virginity and the sinfulness of sex, we can also see how this connection is far from necessary. Nobody has explained this as clearly as Lewis:

With this we stand on the threshold of that Miracle which for some reason proves hardest of all for the modern mind to accept. I can understand the man who denies miracles altogether: but what is one to make of people who will believe other miracles and 'draw the line' at the Virgin Birth? Is it that for all their lip service to the laws of Nature there is only one natural process in which they really believe? Or is it that they think they see in this miracle a slur upon sexual intercourse (though they might just as well see in the feeding of the five thousand an insult to bakers) and that sexual intercourse is the one thing still venerated in this unvenerating age? In reality the Miracle is no less, and no more, surprising than any others.⁶⁰

While Lewis makes clear that asserting the virgin birth in no way discredits human sexuality, he raises a question that is worth considering: What could the message of the virginity of Mary be in a world where sex

⁵⁶ This is the position of Ambrose of Milan; see De Crom, 'The Virgin Birth.'

⁵⁷ Expression used by De Crom, 'The Virgin Birth.'

⁵⁸ Virginity is a state that can be lost by engaging in sex; but, before the Fall, according to John Damascene, the sexual drive was not there. *De fide orthodoxa* 24.

⁵⁹ Asserting the sinfulness of the Church need not contradict confessing the holiness of the Church. See below in our discussion of the holiness of the Church.

⁶⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 165.

is as important as it is in ours? Two answers present themselves. Firstly, in first-century Judaism, holiness in the sense of being at the service of God was considered to be incompatible with entertaining sexual relationships. There is evidence that this applied to prophets and priests, and especially to the high priest.⁶¹ Jesus himself was obviously unmarried. One need not see sexuality as sinful in order to believe that there is a tension between devoting one's entire life to God and engaging in sexual relationships. Sexuality is a very powerful force, and it might be argued that giving in to it is difficult to combine with complete devotion.

A second part of its message could be that sex can also be overrated. There is nothing in Mary's virginity to suggest that virginity is the better and higher alternative for all of us. But, if she who 'first of all human beings, received the full benefit of Christ's incarnation, death and resurrection'⁶² remained a virgin, then sexual fulfillment is no essential ingredient in the salvation brought about by Christ. Compared with some conclusions drawn from the virginity of Mary in traditional theology, these may seem rather moderate conclusions. But in light of some rather dominant values in contemporary Western culture, the influence of which makes itself known also outside the West, this conclusion is highly relevant: Christianity has a different hierarchy of values than the society in which we are living. It evaluates sexual relationships differently: not negatively, but not all-important either.

So far, we have discussed the confession of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus as the confession of *meaningful facts*: as Christians, we believe that Jesus was conceived, and perhaps also born, not in the ordinary biological way. Jesus was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.' The *meaning* of the *virgin* conception is that it underlines the divine initiative leading to Mary's pregnancy and simultaneously leads us to doubt the all-importance of sexual relationships: our ultimate happiness does not depend on these.

Until now, we have, led by the way the incarnation is articulated in the Apostles' Creed, primarily focused on the role of the Holy Spirit and on the virgin birth itself. We should not forget here, however, that what the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed states explicitly, is very much part of the message of the Apostles' Creed as well, even though it is not stated

⁶¹ Klaus Berger, *Wer war Jesus wirklich?* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 25–28.

⁶² De Crom, 'The Virgin Birth.'

explicitly: the incarnation took place ‘for us and our salvation.’ The incarnation is an event in salvation history; it is part of the way God brings about the salvation of human beings. God’s strategy here is not that of a detached technocrat. The way He operates in the incarnation shows self-involvement and even self-emptying of the second Person of the Trinity: ‘Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross’ (Phil. 2:6–8). If the believer, by confessing the Creed, expresses a commitment to God, this commitment is an answer to a previous self-commitment by God.⁶³

Let us shift our attention, then, to this responsive human commitment to God in the Creed. If we read the clause ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary’ in this light, our primary question is no longer: which facts do we confess here? Rather, it becomes: does the confession of the virgin birth also imply human commitments? And if so, to what do we commit ourselves to when we confess the virgin birth? Major spiritual thinkers like Francis and Clare, Hadewijch, and Romano Guardini have answered this question positively. They all take the bodily virginity of Mary for granted but focus on her spiritual virginity. Mary’s spiritual openness to the growing of Christ in her own body can, these thinkers suggest, be emulated by us.⁶⁴ According to Francis, ‘Mary’s openness to the Spirit makes her Mother of God’s Son. But for Francis, this is not a unique prerogative for Mary alone, as it also serves as an invitation to all Christians to shape their relationship to the Spirit with the same openness and docility as Mary.’⁶⁵ By opening ourselves to the Spirit we can become ‘mothers when we carry him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example,’ Francis declares.⁶⁶

⁶³ For the term ‘self-commitment’ in this connection, see Evans, *Logic of Self-Involvement*, 151, 152, 157, 158, 224, 245, 266.

⁶⁴ On this line of thought in the church fathers, see Hugo Rahner, ‘Die Gottesgeburt,’ in: Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1964), 11–87.

⁶⁵ Michael W. Blastic, ‘The Virgin Mary in the Writings of Francis and Clare of Assisi,’ in: Steven J. McMichael & Katherine Wrisley Shelby (eds.), *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary: Mater Sanctissima, Misericordia, et Dolorosa* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 24.

⁶⁶ Francis of Assisi, ‘Later Admonition and Exhortation: To the Brothers and Sisters of Penance (Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful),’ in: Regis

Hadewijch develops the theme of this *imitatio Mariae* in her 'Fourteenth Rhymed Letter,' which was probably addressed to a fellow religious she knew. She channels, as it were, the feelings of celibate women who will have to miss the experience of bodily pregnancy into a nine-month spiritual pregnancy that leads to the growth of transcendent love and, eventually, the spiritual birth of Christ in the heart of the woman going through this process. Each of the nine months has its own theme: faithful fear, joyful suffering, carrying love, the growth of love as a result of passionate good works, the hidden inner experience of love, confidence that the child will be born, the righteousness of love, the wisdom of love, and, finally, the deification of one's whole life.⁶⁷ While Hadewijch explains how the spiritual maternity of Jesus is open to celibate women, Francis of Assisi sees it as open to men also: all of us can carry him in our hearts by our love and give birth to him by our actions. As Clare of Assisi explains, to do this, we do not even need to be celibates: when one carries the Lord with a pure heart, *by that* one is a virgin.⁶⁸

A more recent example of a theologian who derives from belief in the virgin birth a faith commitment is Romano Guardini (1885–1968). He suggests that without Mary's consent, the virgin conception would have been a sort of rape. In other words, her consent is essential. Without it, she would not have become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But, let us try to imagine what 'consent' means in this case. Ordinarily, a woman becomes pregnant as a result of sexual intercourse. Almost always, this intercourse is desired for its own sake, at least by one of the partners. Pregnancy does not stand on its own; it is part of a package deal, part of a relational process. And so is the consent. In Mary's case, the situation seems different. Her pregnancy came about without desire or lust, and it was not clear in advance whether and how it would fit into her relationship with Joseph. A virginal conception was something unprecedented and weird in her time, too. Nevertheless, Mary accepts the angel's proclamation with complete trust in the Lord: 'Let it happen to me as you have said.' Guardini compares Mary's faith to that of Abraham, who left Ur of the Chaldees for the promised land and, later on, was even prepared to

J. Armstrong, J. Wayne Hellmann & William J. Short (eds.), *Francis of Assisi – The Saint: Early Documents* Vol. 1 (St Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1999), 49.

⁶⁷ On Hadewijch, see Rob V.J. Faesen, "'This Brought God down into Mary": Hadewijch on the Pregnancy of the Virgin Mary in the Present,' in: Van Wieringen & Sarot (eds.), 'Born of the Virgin Mary.'

⁶⁸ Clare of Assisi, *Third Letter to Agnes of Prague* 25. Latin and English (transl. by Joan Muller): <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/569.html> [25 April 2023].

sacrifice Isaac. Like Abraham, Mary's trust was complete. It was trust in the face of the unknown and incomprehensible: trust rooted in the faith of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Old Testament. As Guardini notes, Mary's trust expresses her 'exclusive relationship to God.' Therefore, just as consent is embedded in a relation in ordinary cases, this must have been true for Mary as well. Her consent could not have been given without an exceptional trust in God. Guardini calls this trusting faith the 'Marian attitude.'⁶⁹ If we apply this to confessing the Creed and ask what commitment is made by confessing the virgin birth, our answer would be: a commitment to emulate Mary's attitude of perfect trust, embedded in a relationship of loving fellowship with God.

Based on the foregoing, we are able to articulate provisionally what confessing the virgin birth means.

- (1) It means confessing the factual belief that Mary's pregnancy was not caused by sexual intercourse, but by divine intervention. Mary's conception of Jesus is part of salvation history and of God's new creation; in it, God acts "for us and our salvation."
- (2) It means underlining the trust in God that is also expressed in the opening sentence of the Creed, 'I believe in God,' and committing ourselves to a life of enduring trust in God. In this way, we emulate the 'Marian attitude.'
- (3) It means expressing our acceptance of a value system in which sexuality is not all-important. This can be seen as a criticism of our contemporary culture, which often overrates the importance of sex. On the other hand, as Clare of Assisi makes clear, by accepting that a spiritual virginity is also open to those who are not bodily virgins, celibacy is not all-important either. This can be seen as a criticism of the Church, which is inclined to overrate the importance of celibacy.

⁶⁹ Bernhard Hegge, 'The Interpretation of "Born of the Virgin Mary" by Romano Guardini,' in: Van Wieringen & Sarot (eds.), 'Born of the Virgin Mary.' Our rendering of Guardini is a paraphrase of Guardini's analysis in twenty-first-century terms.

I Believe in the Suffering, Death, Resurrection and Second Coming of Jesus Christ

1. The Gap between Birth and Suffering

One of the most striking idiosyncrasies of the Creed is that in the second article, it moves directly from Jesus' birth to his death, as if nothing happened in between. The Creed is silent about Jesus' life, about his acts and teachings, and while mentioning *that* Jesus was crucified, it does not mention *why*. Noticing the omission, Jürgen Moltmann went so far as to suggest an addition both to the Apostles' and to the Nicene Creed:

The intention is not to alter the words of tradition; but one must know what has to be added in thought. After 'born of the Virgin Mary' or 'and was made man,' we should add something along the following lines:

Baptized by John the Baptist,
filled with the Holy Spirit:
to preach the kingdom of God to the poor,
to heal the sick,
to receive those who have been cast out,
to revive Israel for the salvation of the nations, and
to have mercy upon all people.¹

Why does the Creed not include some information on the teachings and works of Jesus? Why this silence? Why this gap between Jesus' birth and final days? The reason can hardly be that Jesus' works and teachings are no longer relevant. Even today, when during the eucharist we read from the gospels that recount these works and teachings, we show our respect by standing while listening, something we do not do when listening to other readings from Scripture.

The striking lack of attention to Jesus' life and teachings in the Apostles' Creed – and also in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed – mirrors a transition that took place in the early church and which we gain insight into when we compare the canonical gospels with Paul's letters.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 150. We would like to thank Rénier Smeets for drawing our attention to this text.

The gospels focus on the life and teachings of Jesus. The key concept is the kingdom of God: Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom of God, an arrival that was not merely imminent but could be perceived to have begun in his own life. Above, we have seen how the way in which Jesus used the word *abba* is an example of that: He embodied the fulfillment of an eschatological expectation. Jesus pointed away from himself, towards the kingdom, and towards his Father, who would reign as king. Paul's letters breathe a different atmosphere. They no longer focus on the kingdom but on Jesus himself. The underlying idea is not that the kingdom was no longer important but that Jesus himself was the central figure in the kingdom: in and with him, it had arrived. Anyone who after Jesus wants to speak about the kingdom cannot but speak firstly and foremostly about Jesus. As Ratzinger explains: 'Origen, basing himself on a reading of Jesus' words, called Jesus the *autobasileia*, that is, the Kingdom in person. Jesus himself is the Kingdom; the Kingdom is not a thing, it is not a geographical dominion like worldly kingdoms. It is a person; it is he.'²

The insight that Jesus is the *autobasileia*, however, is an insight that emerged only after the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was based on the teachings of Jesus, such as Luke 11:20: 'if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.'³ This explains why Paul, in his letters, refers less frequently to the kingdom: 'The phrase "the Lord Jesus Christ"' had become 'an adequate substitute.'⁴ This insight was confirmed by another insight, namely that the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus had been necessary (Luke 24:26) with a view to our salvation (John 3:17). This second insight is reflected in the fact that the gospels were written as 'passion narratives with extended introductions.'⁵

Thus, already within the New Testament, a shift can be perceived from the 'kingdom-centered' proclamation of Jesus to the 'Christ-centered'

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 49.

³ Cf. Luke 17:21; Matt. 13:44–46.

⁴ Karl Ludwig Schmidt, 'The Word Group *basileús* in the NT,' in: Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 101.

⁵ Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 80; cf. Trevor Hart, *Confessing and Believing: The Apostles' Creed as Script for the Human Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 101.

proclamation of his apostles after his resurrection. In the wake of this first shift, a second shift takes place: from the kingdom to the church. In the words of Alfred Loisy: 'Jesus announced the kingdom, and what came was the church.'⁶ This second shift can be explained from the first: after the ascension, it is the church that has the task of representing Jesus in this world. The shift from the kingdom to Jesus thus leads to more emphasis on the church. Therefore, if we want to know the answer to the question: 'What is left of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God in the Apostles' Creed?', we should not look for an answer in the second article of the creed (about Jesus), but rather in the first and in the third. In the first, for as Moltmann has remarked, only *in the kingdom* can we call God Father: 'when God can be called "Abba," then his kingdom has already come.'⁷ And also in the third (about the Holy Spirit), for that discusses the ways in which the Church renders Jesus present to the world.

2. Confessing the Suffering of Jesus under Pontius Pilate

That Jesus suffered underlines the reality of the Incarnation. Becoming human implies becoming embodied. In his Christological hymn in the Epistle to the Philippians Paul states this as follows: Jesus, 'being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross' (Phil 2:6–8). The contrast between 'being in the form of God' and suffering and dying that Paul mentions here, reappeared in various forms in early Christian theology. At the time, Christian theologians almost generally assumed that God was impassible, free from the *passiones*, the fluctuating affective states that are characteristic for human beings. That this impassible God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, suffered, and died was a mysterious paradox. Nestorius (386–451 CE), a monk from Antioch who became bishop of Constantinople in 428 CE, asserted that there were two persons in Christ: one human, the other divine. For him, it was the human person in Christ who was born from Mary and who died on the cross.⁸ Against

⁶ 'Jésus annonçait le Royaume et c'est l'Église qui est venue.' Alfred Loisy, *l'Évangile et l'Église* (Paris: Alphonse Picard: 1902), 111.

⁷ Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 142.

⁸ Nestorius, *First Sermon against the Theotokos*.

Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria (c. 378–444 CE) argued that ‘God the Word is the Savior who remains impassible in his divine nature while also suffering in the flesh.’⁹ This became the classical position when the phrase ‘one of the Trinity was crucified’ was accepted, first by Pope John II in 534 (DH 401–402) and then also by the fifth general council (Constantinople, 553 CE) (DH 432).¹⁰

From the nineteenth century onwards, it became increasingly common to deny the impassibility of the divine nature: if Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:38) and suffering belongs to the core of Jesus’ mission (John 12:27), how can we continue to assert that God is impassible?¹¹ However that may be, the phrase on which we are here commenting is about the suffering of Jesus during the incarnation, as the ‘under Pontius Pilate’ makes clear. And this suffering had a form that only the incarnation, the taking on of the flesh, made possible. Moreover, as Paul’s christological hymn quoted above makes clear, this suffering did not begin at the end of the life of Jesus but was part of it from the very beginning. Where the English reads ‘emptied himself,’ the Greek has *heauton ekenoosen*. *Ekenoosen* is etymologically cognate to *kenosis*; hence the application of *kenosis* (self-emptying) to Jesus’ Incarnation.¹² This makes the *why?*-question even more pregnant: why did the Son have to become incarnate and suffer (and die)?

Various New Testament writers answer this question quite clearly: Jesus died for our sins, in order that we might be saved. This is the view of Paul: ‘It is proof of God’s own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. How much more can we be sure, therefore, that, now that we have been justified by his death, we shall be saved through him from the retribution of God’ (Rom. 5:8–9). It is also the view of Peter: ‘Christ himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, to lead us to God’ (1 Peter 3:18). John and Matthew concur: ‘This is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, ‘A Defense of the Twelve Anathemas against Theodoret,’ in: Cyril of Alexandria, *Three Christological Treatises* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), quot. 130.

¹⁰ Marcel Sarot, ‘Theopaschites,’ in: David G. Hunter, Paul J.J. van Geest, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (eds.), *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online* [1 May 2023].

¹¹ Marcel Sarot, ‘A Moved Mover? The (Im)passibility of God,’ in: Van den Brink & Sarot (eds.), *Understanding the Attributes of God*, 119–137.

¹² On *kenosis*, kenoticism and the Christological hymn, see Marcel Sarot, ‘Beyond Kenoticism: Why the Suffering God had to Become Man,’ *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Theologische Tydskrif* 53 (2012) Suppl. 3, 103–105.

who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16); 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28). According to these writers, then, the incarnation is *constitutive* of salvation. Many have asked the question of *how* the suffering and death of Jesus can cause our salvation. The New Testament writers do not give a unanimous answer to this question. In fact, various authors offer various answers. Jesus' death is interpreted as a ransom (paid to the devil?), as redemption (from the power of sin and death), as salvation (being saved *from* sin and death, or from the wrath of God, and *to* eternal life), as a sacrifice, as a propitiation for our sins, as expiation, as atonement, as reconciliation, as victory, as punishment or penalty, as satisfaction, as liberation, and finally, as an example for us to imitate. This list of interpretations of the death of Jesus, or 'models of salvation,' is taken from a book by John McIntyre.¹³ McIntyre shows that each of these models has roots in the New Testament and has had representatives in later theology. Here, we do not need to make a choice between them. It is important that there is a causal connection between Jesus's suffering and death and our salvation, but we need not specify the precise nature of this connection. The fact that so many models are available and the tradition has not made a definitive choice between them suggests that various of these models provide partial insight, while a full understanding is beyond us.¹⁴ Given the silence of the Creed on this issue, we need not go beyond this provisional conclusion.

The fact that it is specified that Jesus' suffering took place 'under Pontius Pilate' underlines that this is a historical event, not a mythological one or a significant story, but something that really happened at a specific time and place in our world. As Trevor Hart has it:

The simple fact is that his political career provided the church with a straightforward and convenient way to anchor the event of Jesus's death in history, Pilate's term of office being logged in the archives of the Roman government. It reminds us that the story of Jesus is not one that we can treat as having happened 'once upon a time' or 'a long time ago

¹³ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 26–52. McIntyre also mentions an additional model, on which Jesus' suffering and death *reveal* to us the love of God. This model has, although it lacks support in the New Testament, become very popular in the twentieth century. On it, Jesus' death is not constitutive of our salvation, but merely *expressive*: it expresses the salvation God had already brought about.

¹⁴ Cf. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins Fontana, ⁵1958), 53–55; Hart, *Confessing and Believing*, 110–112.

in a galaxy far, far away,' let alone ending with everyone living 'happily ever after.' ... [The mentioning of Pilate enables] us to date Jesus's execution to somewhere between 26 and 36 CE, the years of Pilate's term as procurator of Judea.¹⁵

The fact that Pontius Pilate is mentioned, and the Creed is silent on King Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas, Peter, and others, does not imply an evaluation of the role of Pilate, then. It is important that it is a Roman official that is mentioned and not a Jewish one.

EXCURSUS:

THE JEWS, THE ROMANS, AND THE CRUCIFIXION

The gospels exhibit a tendency to emphasize the responsibility of the Jews for the crucifixion rather than that of the Romans. According to Daniel R. Schwartz, this was 'part of the apologetics of the early Church,' which wanted to emphasize that it in no way presented a threat to the Romans.¹⁶ It is obvious that if Christians wanted to survive in a Roman-ruled empire, they had to make clear that they were no dangerous rebels. One of the ways the Gospel of John shifts the moral responsibility for Jesus' death to the Jews is by making them say: 'It's illegal for us to execute anyone' (John 18:31). The scholars of the Jesus Seminar note: 'The accuracy of this claim is doubtful; it suggests that the Jewish authorities would have executed Jesus if they could.' And commenting on John 19:16, they continue: 'The resulting implication that all the Jews/Judeans, or perhaps only some Jewish officials, crucified Jesus – as Pilate had suggested (v. 6) – is wholly inaccurate. In historical fact, whatever Pilate's view of Jesus' guilt, it was certainly he who saw to the execution (see v. 19); crucifixion was never practiced by Jews. The monstrous unreality of this half-verse, if it reads as intended, must be entirely a function of theological or political polemic.'¹⁷ Even if this is an overstatement, it makes clear that there are doubts about the historical credibility of the claim that the Jews could not execute someone, as there are also about the claim that crucifixion took place at their request. It seems unlikely, however, that at a moment when Christianity had no political power whatsoever, the gospel writers could foresee that the way they told the final days of Jesus could play a

¹⁵ Hart, *Confessing and Believing*, 100.

¹⁶ Daniel R. Schwartz, 'Pontius Pilate,' in: David N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 399–400.

¹⁷ Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 238, 240.

role in future antisemitism. This also applies to Matt. 25:25b 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' The alleged Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion may be a part of the Christian apology towards the Romans, and it may also be intended as an explanation for the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE).¹⁸ This does not take away that later on, these texts have become fertile sources of antisemitism. Fortunately, the shifting of responsibility for the crucifixion from the Romans to the Jews is not supported by the Creed.

3. Confessing the Crucifixion, Death, and Burial of Jesus

Jesus did not merely suffer, he was crucified. For Christians of the twenty-first century, and especially for Catholics, the image of the crucifixion has become domesticized. They are used to seeing crosses, with corpus, in every private house, often in every room, and in every classroom and church, and as a result, the image does not affect them much. This stands in stark contrast to the early church. The New Testament does nothing to hide the fact that Jesus was crucified, but it also calls the cross a 'scandal,' a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11). This scandal is reflected in the fact that until the third-century visual representations of the crucifixion and the cross were rare in the early church, and that Christian authors used euphemisms like 'wood' (cf. Acts 5:30), 'sign' and 'horn' to refer to the cross.¹⁹

Crucifixion was a scandal for at least two reasons: its humiliation and its cruelty. These were not unconnected, of course. Cicero, writing against Verres, the Roman governor of Sicily who had an innocent fellow Roman citizen crucified, explains: 'It is an outrage to shackle a Roman citizen, an abomination to flog him, and all but parricide to kill him – so what can I say about crucifying him? Words do not exist to describe so wicked an act.'²⁰ According to Cicero, crucifixion should not even be *mentioned*

¹⁸ Craig Evans, *Matthew* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 455.

¹⁹ Gerardus Q. Reijnders, *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature as Based on Old Testament Typology* (Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1965). We want to thank Dr Ruben van Wingerden for drawing our attention to this publication. Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) argues that the symbol of the cross had a more central place in the early church.

²⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *In Verrem* II.5.170, in: Cicero, *Political Speeches* transl. by D.H. Berry (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 94.

near a Roman citizen.²¹ Only people with a low social status – mostly slaves – were crucified. Crucifixion was seen as degrading, and the nakedness of the victim and the denial of burial added to the disgrace.²² As to the cruelty of crucifixion, Philip J. Hughes has pointed out that it far exceeds that of most other forms of execution:

burning, hanging, stoning, drowning, quartering, strangling, the guillotine, decapitation, shooting, electrocution, gassing and lethal injection. Whilst all are heinous to twenty-first century humanist eyes, they predominantly result in a relatively quick death and are not utilised as a means of torture. Indeed, torture, as we understand it today, is largely employed to extract information and not as method of enacting the death penalty. ... Crucifixion was an excruciating experience designed to punish, torture, humiliate and kill the victim while providing a spectacle.²³

That death came slow – somewhere between three hours and four days – was deliberate. In Jesus' case, it came relatively quickly, after six hours, suggesting that He received a substantial whipping prior to his execution.²⁴ Dying on the cross, humiliated, degraded, dishonored, and in excruciating pain, 'with loud cries and with tears' (Heb. 5:7), seems to be the ultimate failure of Jesus' life and mission.²⁵ That the gospels, Paul and the Apostles' Creed explicitly mention the crucifixion, thereby offending good taste,²⁶ shows how important the suffering of Jesus nevertheless was for the earliest Christians.

That Jesus *died* means that He was not in some way or other liberated from the cross by his disciples and saved. He underwent the agony of crucifixion to the very end, and – as the New Testament tells us, 'offered up prayer and entreaty' (Heb. 5:7) for others, and even for his executioners (Luke 23:34). The *burial* of Jesus once more confirms his death: Jesus completed the full cycle of human life, from conception to burial. The burial, moreover, functions as a contrasting concept for what the Creed states about Jesus' resurrection. Mentioning the burial of Jesus also makes impossible a misunderstanding of the descent into the realm of the dead, as if Jesus went into the realm of the dead (in some translations:

²¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo* 5.16.

²² Philip J. Hughes, 'Dishonour, Degradation and Display: Crucifixion in the Roman World,' *HARTS & Minds: The Journal of Humanities and Arts* 1/3 (Winter 2013–14), 2–3.

²³ Hughes, 'Dishonour, Degradation and Display,' 3; cf. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ²1978), 22–38.

²⁴ Hughes, 'Dishonour, Degradation and Display,' 4.

²⁵ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 4–7.

²⁶ Hughes, 'Dishonour, Degradation and Display,' 6.

‘into hell’) instead of going into the grave. It was *while* being in the grave that Jesus visited the realm of the dead. For many Christians, confessing the burial of Jesus may remind them of the gospel stories about Jesus’ burial. Archibald van Wieringen draws attention to the representation of the tomb as a second womb in the ancient Near East: the suggestion then is that from this second tomb, one is born into the afterlife. Traces of this idea may be present in the Old Testament (e.g., in Job 1:21; Eccl. 5:14), and the fact that the gospels emphasize the newness of Jesus’ grave may also point in this direction (Matt. 27:60; Luke 23:53).²⁷ For those for whom the association between tomb and womb was alive, then, the mentioning of Jesus’ burial may also have been hopeful. This association, however, is not suggested by the wording of the Creed.

Summarizing, we have seen how the incarnation, suffering, death, and burial of Jesus are part of an ongoing process of self-emptying undergone by the Son, the second person of the Trinity. In some way or other this process constitutes our salvation; our salvation is dependent on it. Since in this commentary on the Creed, we do not merely focus on the beliefs articulated in it but also give attention to what confessing the Creed means for the lives of Christians, it seems obvious to focus on that now. If one believes what is confessed in these sentences, which attitude should one adopt? In the Gospel of John, Jesus comments in the following way on what is confessed in these sentences: ‘No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends’ (John 15:13). The first attitude mediated by these sentences seems to be gratitude: gratitude towards the one who gave up his life to win salvation for us. The second attitude mediated by these sentences is to return his love. To return God’s love, however, is done firstly and foremostly by loving our neighbors, as John especially makes clear: ‘Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins. Anyone who says, “I love God” and hates his brother, is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen. Indeed, this is the commandment we have received from him, that whoever loves God, must also love his brother’ (1 John 4:10, 20–21). ‘You must love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will recognize you as my disciples’ (John 13:34–35).

It is sometimes thought that this neighbor love consists of entertaining feelings of fondness for them. This is a misunderstanding. We must

²⁷ See Archibald van Wieringen, ‘Born of the Virgin Mary: Various Old Testament Backgrounds,’ in: Van Wieringen & Marcel Sarot (eds.), ‘Born of the Virgin Mary.’

love our neighbors *as ourselves*, and loving ourselves does not primarily consist of positive feelings for ourselves. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, we may dislike our own cowardice, conceit, or greed, but continue loving ourselves. That self-love does not consist in liking ourselves, however, but in wishing the best for ourselves. This also applies to loving our neighbor, and even our enemy: it means ‘wishing his good, not feeling fond of him nor saying he is nice when he is not.’²⁸ And if one really wishes for someone’s good, one will work towards that as one works towards one’s own good. Christians should work for the good of their neighbors. Even when they are not aware that in doing this, they are in fact loving Christ, this is the case:

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.’ Then the upright will say to him in reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?’ And the King will answer, ‘In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me’ (Matt. 25:34–40).

Jesus’ love for us involved suffering: severe suffering, we have seen above. Our loving him in return does also involve suffering, whether we like it or not (and most of us don’t!). This is underscored especially in the repeated admonition to take our cross upon us (Mark 8:34; Matt. 10:38, 16:24; Luke 14:27). In the early church, this admonition has been taken literally by those who sought martyrdom or at least thought that it was not allowed to flee from it. In Luke 9:23, however, the addition of ‘every day’ means that literal martyrdom cannot be intended: ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me.’ Luke seems to interpret cross-bearing as a continuous dying to oneself, by giving up one’s possessions.²⁹ And Matthew 10:23a (‘If they persecute you in one town, take refuge in the next; and if they persecute you in that, take refuge in another’)

²⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 105.

²⁹ See Ruben van Wingerden, *Martyrdom and Metaphor: Cross-bearing Interpretations in Early Christianity* (Utrecht: Libertas Pascal, 2023), 92–100; cf. Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2010), 31.

was sometimes interpreted as implying that it was allowed to flee persecution.³⁰

Though opinions differed on the question of whether taking one's cross upon oneself includes martyrdom, all agree that this refers to some form of suffering.³¹ When this suffering is accepted in imitation of Christ, it unites with Christ. Paul writes: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (Col. 1:24 RSVCE). Pope John Paul II comments: 'In the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings – in any part of the world and at any time in history – to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world.'³² The suffering that Christians accept when they take up their cross upon themselves, then, is a suffering endured in communion with Christ. Moreover, it shares in the redemptive character of the suffering of Christ himself. Much more could be said about the Christian approach to suffering; libraries have been filled with what has been written about it. But the bottom line is this: any genuinely Christian approach to suffering avoids the vain promise of immediate relief. Instead, it relates human suffering to the cross of Jesus Christ and thereby clarifies its meaning. It is the resurrection of Christ that gives us the hope that a time will come when 'He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain' (Rev. 21:4).

In short, for the Christian life confessing the suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial means three things. Firstly, our lives will be lived in gratitude to Jesus, who gave up his life for us, and did so in a most painful way. Secondly, the awareness that Jesus did this out of love for us is a strong incentive to love him in return. His commitment motivates our commitment. When we read these lines of the Creed with due attention – 'mindfully,' many would say nowadays – they cannot fail to stir up love in our hearts. And thirdly, this will also change our attitude towards suffering, which from now on may be a means of greater intimacy with Jesus. Thus, our suffering will share in the meaning, and even in the redemptive force, of Christ's suffering.

³⁰ Van Wingerden, *Martyrdom and Metaphor*, 162, 189–190: this was the interpretation Clement of Alexandria favored and Tertullian rejected (while stating that it was widespread).

³¹ Moss, *The Other Christs*, 19–44.

³² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, Rome 11 February 1984, 24.

4. Confessing the Descent to the Dead

What does it mean to confess Jesus' descent to the dead? Many agree with T.H. Bindley that 'its purport is to emphasize the reality of our Lord's death against Docetic teaching, by affirming that His death was attended by the same consequences as attend the death of every human being.'³³ This interpretation has its roots in the earliest interpretation of this phrase of the Creed, that by Rufinus: 'Its meaning [...] appears to be precisely the same as that contained in the affirmation BURIED.'³⁴ This seems insufficient to explain the inclusion of this phrase in the Creed, however, and therefore J.N.D. Kelly seems correct when he suggests that Rufinus 'was clearly in the dark as to [the] real bearing and intention' of this clause.³⁵

What is this 'real bearing and intention'? Let's begin our answer by noting that there are two versions of the text, the version given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and that given in the English version of the Mass of the Roman Rite of 2011. While the *Catechism* translates, *He descended to the dead*, the English Mass translates *he descended into hell*. *To the dead* or *into hell* are quite different things, at least to twenty-first-century people. These different English texts mirror different Latin texts. Since the Council of Trent, the Latin text has read *descendit ad inferos* (*he descended to those below*). The more ancient version, however, seems to be *descendit ad inferna* (*he descended to the lower regions*), which is a literal translation of the Greek.³⁶ What the Greek text and the two Latin versions have in common is that they suggest a direction: Christ went from a higher place to a lower place. Since the Creed states that He did so between his burial and his resurrection, and since the ancient Near East associated death, the underworld, and hell (whichever is applicable) with being under the earth, it seems obvious to suppose that the article is asserting that Christ went to some such place (the underworld, or hell) after his burial, but the nature of that place is left unspecified. Who else was in that place? All people who had died? The just patriarchs (and matriarchs) of the Old Testament, waiting for their redemption? Or people who had received eternal punishment? All of these interpretations have been proposed, and the text does not specify which of them is correct.

³³ T. Herbert Bindley, *The Creeds: Four Addresses* (London: SPCK, 1896), 24.

³⁴ Rufinus, *Commentary*, 18 (ET 52).

³⁵ See Kelly's comments in: Rufinus, *Commentary*, 121.

³⁶ Cf. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed*, 236–237, who also notes that Rufinus of Aquileia has the variant *descendit in inferna*.

Since the phrasing of this article of the Creed is not very informative, it would be helpful if we knew where, when, and why it was introduced into the Apostles' Creed. Sadly, however, we know none of these things. The earliest occurrence that we know of is in the late fourth-century form of the Apostles' Creed of Aquileia, as we find it in Rufinus;³⁷ subsequently, it can also be found in Gaul and Spain. But that is all we know. We also know that the idea was not entirely new; for instance, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), and Tertullian (160–240) already mentioned it. How it came to acquire the importance that made inclusion in the (Western) Apostles' Creed desirable, while despite its importance to the liturgy and iconography of Easter in the East it was not included in the (Eastern) Nicene Creed, is as yet unclear.

The most important Biblical text connected with the descent is 1 Pet. 3:18–22.³⁸ In light of the Creed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this text is about the descent. The text runs as follows:

18 Christ himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life,

19 and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison.

20 They refused to believe long ago, while God patiently waited to receive them, in Noah's time when the ark was being built. In it only a few, that is eight souls, were saved through water.

21 It is the baptism corresponding to this water which saves you now – not the washing off of physical dirt but the pledge of a good conscience given to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

22 who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, with angels, ruling forces and powers subject to him.

A number of questions need to be answered with respect to this text.

1. *When did Christ preach to the spirits in prison?* In other words, how do we interpret the phrase *in the spirit he was raised to life*? On one interpretation, this took place at the time of Noah; if that is true, then this text is not about the descent into the underworld. The problem with this interpretation is that Christ had not been put to death in the body at the time of Noah. On a second interpretation, this text is about the resurrection; in that case, it is not about the descent into the

³⁷ For the descent in other early Creeds, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 378.

³⁸ For a survey of various interpretations of this text, see Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 11–15. See also John N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969), 146–164. Our discussion of this text summarises the debates of New Testament scholars that go into more detail than we can do here.

underworld either. The problem with this interpretation is that the resurrection is not about the spirit only, but about the body, and while we do have texts about Christ being on earth or in heaven after the resurrection, a visit to *the spirits in prison* would be a novelty. Therefore, this interpretation seems implausible as well. If, on the other hand, we interpret the text as dealing with the descent into the underworld, this interpretation neatly fits the order of the text: death (v. 18), descent (18–19), resurrection (21), and entering heaven (22).

2. *Where was the prison* in which the spirits to whom Christ went to preach were kept? The text does not mention the underworld. If, however, the reference to *the spirits in prison who refused to believe long ago, while God patiently waited to receive them, in Noah's time when the ark was being built* is taken at face value, Christ went where the disobedient (at this stage perhaps repentant) antediluvians were.³⁹ If we want to know more about that place, we must look at ancient Jewish views of the afterlife. Until the persecution of the Jews in the second century BCE, Jews believed that death was the final end (cf., e.g., Job 14: 7–14), or that the dead led some shadowy existence in *sheol* or *hades*. This was a joyless existence in the netherworld, where one was separated from one's loved ones and even from God (Isa. 38:10–11). At the time of Jesus, this seems still to have been the view of the Sadducees, who openly mocked belief in a resurrection (Matt. 22:23–33). In other Jewish circles, however, further developments had taken place, developments that provided the Sadducees with the object for their derision. Some Psalms express the confidence that even our death cannot stop God from communicating with us (Pss. 16:10; 49:15; 73:24). And from the Maccabean era onwards we find a belief in the resurrection in some circles, motivated by the fact that Jews could not reconcile the idea that God would leave the Maccabean martyrs to rest in their graves with the idea of God's justice (2 Macc. 7; Dan. 12). A development that ran parallel to the rise of belief in a reward after death on account of the Maccabean martyrs was the emergence of

³⁹ Sometimes the sons of God who married human women in Gen. 6:1–4 are also mentioned. The main reason for this interpretation is that the term *pneuma* seldom refers to human beings (but see Heb. 12:23). See Kelly, *Epistles*, for more reasons. If we accept that 1 Pet. 3:16 refers to Gen. 6:1, we have to consider a visit of Christ to the sons of God or the wicked angels in addition to the descent into the underworld (Christ visiting the dead [1 Pet. 4:6]). This interpretation is too speculative, but it would emphasise even more the wide scope of redemption and it would be in line with Rom. 8:22, which says that the whole world is awaiting redemption.

belief in punishment after death. The Greek word that is translated as *hell* in many Bible translations is *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* refers to the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, which is mentioned in 2 Chr. 28:3 and 33:6 in relation to pagan sacrifices. From this, *Gehenna* acquired the sense of the eschatological destination of the wicked. The word is not used in this sense in the Old Testament, but Jesus obviously did use it, as the example of Matt. 23:33 shows.

Where does this leave us with respect to 1 Peter? We cannot be certain that the author of 1 Peter made a distinction between places of reward and punishment in the hereafter, but if he did, he seems to imply that Jesus went to the latter abode as well, since he went not only to the dead in general but also to those who *refused to believe long ago*. 1 Peter may not contain a full-fledged doctrine of hell, but it certainly does not state that Christ went to the place where only the righteous of the old covenant were waiting for their redemption.⁴⁰ Here too, Jesus came for the sinners rather than for the just.⁴¹

3. What was the *aim* of Christ's preaching? Was it to offer redemption to the repentant, or was it to show the damned the justice of their sentence? John N.D. Kelly interprets Christ's preaching as the proclamation of a message of doom; to support his case, he refers to a parallel with an apocryphal text on Enoch, who proclaimed doom to the apostates.⁴² This interpretation, however, runs counter to the very opening of the text under discussion: 'Christ himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, to lead us to God.' Moreover, it also conflicts with 1 Pet. 4:6: 'And this was why the gospel was brought to the dead as well, so that, though in their bodies they had undergone the judgement that faces all humanity, in their spirit they might enjoy the life of God.'

⁴⁰ It appears, moreover, that Jesus and his earliest followers did not believe that the just of the old covenant were in a place or state from which they needed to be redeemed. In the parable on Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31), a *great gulf* (26) was fixed after their respective deaths, which the rich man could not cross, and Abraham was on the right side of this gulf. Cf. Augustine, *Epistola* 164, III 7.

⁴¹ Matt. 10:14–15 also seems to imply that the sinners from the Old Testament are not utterly lost: 'And if anyone does not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, as you walk out of the house or town shake the dust from your feet. In truth I tell you, on the Day of Judgement it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.'

⁴² Kelly, *Epistles*, 156–157.

Other New Testament texts that have been mentioned in connection with the descent of Christ include Matt. 12:40; 27:52; Acts 2:24–27; Rom. 10:6–7 and Eph. 4:9.⁴³ While there is good reason in some cases to claim that such passages indeed refer to the descent into the realm of the dead (e.g. Matt. 12:40), they merely assert the doctrine without adding to its interpretation. We will not, therefore, discuss these texts in more detail here.⁴⁴

Is the descent part of Christ's suffering or victory? The Apostles' Creed situates Christ's descent into the realm of the dead between his suffering, death, and burial on the one hand, and his resurrection on the other. This has led to a debate on which part of Christ's life the descent belongs to: his suffering or his victory? On the one hand, we have the patristic depiction of the harrowing of hell, which represents Christ's descent as a sort of victorious raid into enemy territory. The enemy warlord in this picture is Satan, and it is from his claws that Christ liberates the Hebrew patriarchs, or, in another early Christian version, the whole of humanity, symbolized by Adam.⁴⁵

On the other hand, medieval theologians, starting from the axiom that sinners had to be punished before they could be justified before God, regarded the descent as a prolongation and/or intensification of Christ's suffering.⁴⁶ Thus Aquinas in his final treatment of the descent into hell, in the *Summa Theologiae*, no longer hesitated to say that Christ suffered the punishment that we deserved in hell. As it was fitting that Christ died to free us from death, so it was fitting that he descended into hell in our place. In this view, the descent completes Christ's suffering, and thereby our redemption.⁴⁷ Following in the same train of thought, John Calvin took a step further and declared the descent to be 'an expression of the spiritual torment that Christ underwent for us'.⁴⁸ Of this spiritual torment

⁴³ See Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 15–22.

⁴⁴ There is one text that is *prima facie* incompatible with a descent into hell between burial and resurrection: Jesus saying to the *good thief* in Luke 23:43: 'In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.' For Aquinas' solution to this difficulty, see Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 50–51. For her own solution, which combines reading *today* as *this day* and referring to eschatological time, and interpreting paradise and the underworld not as physical locations but as eternal states, see 190–195.

⁴⁵ Texts about the liberation of the exiles in Babylon such as Psalm 107; Zech. 9:11–12 became favourite patristic proof texts for the harrowing of hell. See Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 86.

⁴⁶ Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 85.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *STh* III 52,1.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), II xvi 10, heading.

Calvin claims: 'not only [was] Christ's body ... given as the price of our redemption, but ... he paid a greater and more excellent price in suffering in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.'⁴⁹ What is new compared to Aquinas is that for Calvin, hell is 'not a place beneath the ground, but rather a condition of inner torment, *in other words*, a psychological state.'⁵⁰ Thus for Calvin, saying that Christ descended into hell is a way of expressing the depth of Christ's sufferings on the cross, and the Creed 'put[s] after his burial what preceded it.'⁵¹ In our time, Hans Urs von Balthasar has restated Calvin's view that Christ suffers the pain of eternal punishment in his descent.⁵² Moreover, his reduction of the descent to a psychological state of agony seems to have met with the approval of Joseph Ratzinger, who writes about 'Jesus' descent into *sheol*, in the night of the soul which he suffered, a night which no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith.'⁵³

Conversion after death? The principal Church Fathers of the first three centuries were inclined to interpret 1 Pet. 3:18–20 as referring to Christ who preached to the dead with a view to converting them.⁵⁴ For Clement of Alexandria, the question was not whether such preaching and conversion was possible after death, but whether it also applied to non-Jews. His answer was: yes, at least in the sense that if Christ himself did not preach to them, his apostles would do so.⁵⁵ Both the fact that Clement posed this question and the answer he gave are important. It shows that for him, the doctrine of the descent into hell was connected with the scope of redemption, with the question of whom Christ reached and whom He did not reach, and whether there are any groups of people He did not reach. It does not come as a surprise, then, that the early Christian theologian who went furthest in affirming that all would be saved,

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* II xvi 10.

⁵⁰ Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 86.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes* II xvi 10.

⁵² See, e.g., Alyssa Lyra Pitstick & Edward T. Oakes, 'Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange,' *First Things* December 2006 <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/12/balthasar-hell-and-heresy-an-exchange> [06 06 2023]. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. by Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 148–88.

⁵³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. by Aidan Nichols (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 217.

⁵⁴ P. Callon, 'Descente du Christ aux Enfers,' in: G. Jacquemet (ed.), *Catholicisme hier aujourd'hui demain* Vol. 3 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1952), 659.

⁵⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, VI 6. On the after-death preaching of the apostles, see also *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Parables 93 [=IX 16], 5–7.

Origen (184/5–253/4), saw in the descent into hell one of the means that Christ used to bring about universal salvation.⁵⁶ In reaction to this kind of interpretation, Augustine argued that Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison took place at the time of Noah, thus effectively suppressing the theological idea of conversion after death.⁵⁷

Where does this bring us? What do we confess when we confess that Jesus descended to the dead? Firstly, and most obviously, we confess that Jesus did not undergo some form of near-death experience; He really died. When the Creed claims about Jesus that 'He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell,' the clause *was buried* may be seen as an elaboration of the consequences of his death for his body (it was buried in a grave) and the clause 'He descended into hell' as an elaboration of the consequences of his death for his soul: it went to *sheol, hades*, the underworld.⁵⁸ In the terms of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 'This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men,⁵⁹ experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead' (632).⁶⁰ He remained in the grave until the third day; his process of dying was complete by the time the resurrection took place. Consequently, his resurrection was not some kind of resuscitation. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar: 'In that same way that, upon earth, he was in solidarity with the living, so, in the tomb, he is in solidarity with the dead.'⁶¹

Confessing that Jesus really was dead does not exhaust the meaning of his descent into hell. The patristic depiction of the harrowing of hell correctly underlines that Christ's suffering, death, burial and descent all took place *for us and our salvation*. There may be legitimate dispute about who benefited from Christ's descent into hell. 1 Peter 3 seems to imply that only the antediluvian sinners reaped these benefits. Early Christian

⁵⁶ *Contra Celsum* II 43.

⁵⁷ Callon, 'Descente,' 660. Cf. our 'The Scope of Redemption: On Finding Meaning in Christ's Descent into Hell,' in: Sarot & Van Wieringen (eds.), *The Apostles' Creed*, 202.

⁵⁸ Cf. Laufer, *Hell's Destruction*, 86. As Laufer notes earlier on, the descent into hell takes the place of Christ's death in the Athanasian Creed *Quicumque vult*: [Christ] ... suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead (3).

⁵⁹ Our italics – MS. The death of Jesus is both a consequence and a confirmation of the reality of the incarnation.

⁶⁰ This is also the interpretation given by Douglas K. Harink, *1 & 2 Peter* (London: SCM, 2009), 99.

⁶¹ Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 148–149.

liturgies,⁶² Aquinas,⁶³ and the *Roman Catechism* all agree that Christ entered the *limbus patrum* to save all of the Hebrew patriarchs (and not only the antediluvian patriarchs): 'It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Saviour in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.'⁶⁴ However, there is reason to think that Christ cast the net even wider. For one thing, we know from another context that Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt. 9:13; cf. 1 Tim. 1:15). This is supported by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which seems to correct the older *Roman Catechism* when it claims that Christ went 'to the abode of the dead, ... *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek, [where] all the dead, whether evil or righteous, ... await the Redeemer' (633). As 1 Pet. 4:6 has it, Christ came to visit the dead: not some subcategory of the dead, but all of them. He came to redeem them, and thus his redemptive work also extends to those who had died long before his birth. This does not in itself amount to universalism, just as the fact that Christ came for all the living does not amount to universalism. By saying that God's offer of salvation extends to all we do not imply that it is accepted by all.

We do not need to choose between the view that the descent is part of Christ's victory and the view that it belongs to his suffering. Suffering and redemption, death and victory cannot in this way be opposed to each other. It was *by suffering* and dying on the cross that Christ brought about redemption. As the Gospel of John emphasizes, Jesus' crucifixion *is* his exaltation, his death *is* his victory. If the descent into hell has a redemptive quality, then one would expect it to include an aspect of suffering as well. The suffering of Jesus did not end at his death but continued thereafter. Jesus drank our cup to the dregs and, in doing so, did not receive a special or better treatment than other people. Jesus' solidarity with us did not stop at his death but went on even in death itself. The words 'It is completed,' which He spoke before He died, must not deceive us, as if Jesus' suffering was complete when He died on the cross. When we go home from church on Good Friday, after having meditated on the Passion according to St. John or on the Stations of the Cross, there is no reason for relief, as if the misery were over and we were now merely waiting for Easter and the resurrection. Holy Saturday is the moment to remember how Jesus shared in the punishment for the unjust and how,

⁶² Rouwhorst, 'Descent of Christ.'

⁶³ Harm Goris, 'Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Descent into Hell,' in: Sarot & Van Wieringen (eds.), *The Apostles' Creed*, 109–112.

⁶⁴ CCC 633, quoting *Roman Catechism* I, 6, 3.

after his death, He was not treated differently from them. Thus, we may apply to the descent Ephesians 4:9: 'he had gone down to the deepest levels of the earth.'

If the descent is about suffering, it is also part of the Christian answer to suffering. Karl Rahner puts this as follows:

Since we are hewn from the same block and since we too are already dying our own deaths in the midst of our lives, we are in a position to understand his fate not merely as outsiders and bystanders, but by actually sharing in it... Since he has descended into the unfathomable and bottomless depths of the world there is no longer any abyss in human experience in which man is abandoned and alone.⁶⁵

Above we quoted Pope John Paul II on the meaning of suffering, claiming that by suffering for and with us, Christ has changed the nature of suffering in general, so that also when we suffer, this suffering is potentially redemptive.⁶⁶ In the words of his successor, Pope Benedict XVI:

Christ descended into *Hell* and is therefore close to those cast into it, transforming their darkness into light. Suffering and torment is still terrible and well-nigh unbearable. Yet the star of hope has risen – the anchor of the heart reaches the very throne of God. Instead of evil being unleashed within man, the light shines victorious: suffering – without ceasing to be suffering – becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise.⁶⁷

Finally, if it is part of the meaning of Jesus' descent into hell that through it Jesus made his redemption available to people who by being born before him were seemingly beyond the reach of this redemption, this must have a wider significance as well: the limits of God's grace are not determined by the contingencies of his creatures' birth. Redemption includes those who were born before Christ and whose fate seemed already to have been decided. It also includes those born before Christ and outside God's chosen people, as Clement of Alexandria argued in connection with the descent. Is this not also significant with respect to people who were not born at the wrong time (before Jesus Christ), but in the wrong place (in a region where Christ had not been preached or where the cultural availability of Christianity was next to non-existent)? Gavin d'Costa was the first to suggest that 'the descent explains ... how the fruits of the cross are applied to those before Christ and can continue

⁶⁵ Karl Rahner, 'He Descended into Hell,' in *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 1*, Theological Investigations 7 trans. by David John Bourke (New York: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 145–150, quot. 150.

⁶⁶ See above, 81.

⁶⁷ *Spe salvi* 37.

to explain how the fruits of the cross can be applied to those analogically living before Christ, even if they are chronologically living after Christ.⁶⁸ The analogy that D'Costa draws here is the analogy between Jews who lived and died before Jesus, were therefore not reached by his message and were thus incapable of accepting it, on the one hand, and followers of other religions who have not been reached by Jesus' message and are thus incapable of accepting it, on the other.

Going beyond D'Costa, we would like to suggest that there is much to be said for an even broader interpretation of this analogy. It applies not only to those who were raised in other religions and who have never even heard the name of Christ or seen the sign of the cross. It also includes people who were raised within another religion and who have heard of Christ, but to whom the choice for Christ and his Church has never been presented as a living option. The same may apply to some who live in the Western world but who are brought up and continue to live in circles where Christianity is so misrepresented that it seems to be the option of a past era only, and no longer a living option that sensible people of our time might choose. While it is not possible to give clear criteria that help to distinguish with certainty between people to whom Christianity has been presented as a living option and people to whom it has not – it is up to God and not to us to decide who has had a fair chance to choose Christ – it is important not to underestimate the extent to which in parts of the Western world, Christianity has lost its status as a living option for all. The analogy may even apply to some who have been baptized and brought up as Christians but against whom representatives of the Church committed offenses of a sexual or other nature. These offenses may have made Christianity psychologically unavailable to the victims because they associated Christianity with the offenses rather than with Christ. Here again, it is not up to us to judge; only God knows.

It might be objected against this position that it takes some form of *post-mortem* conversion to be possible, which seems to be excluded by the Catholic tradition. The Church takes life before death to have decisive significance and asserts that 'each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven – through a purification or immediately – or immediate and everlasting damnation' (CCC 1021). A fundamental rejection of God cannot be undone after death (CCC 1035; cf. Luke 16:19–31). On the

⁶⁸ Gavin d'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 161–211, quot. 179–180.

other hand, praying for the dead is regarded as meaningful, and at least in some cases, it is assumed to make a difference. The same applies to purgatory, which is often seen in terms of purification. Now, it seems strange and unsatisfactory to assume that these things can only change God's attitude, moving him to admit people to heaven who would not otherwise have gone there without some measure of change in the humans involved. Is it not implied in the very concept of purification that those who are being purified become purer, in other words, that they grow in their openness to God? If this is what happens, does that not amount to a form of conversion?

Is it possible to claim simultaneously that after-death actions and events may make a substantial difference to one's final destiny (which is what we have suggested about those who refused to believe in the days of Noah, and *mutatis mutandis* about certain contemporary groups of people) and that life before death has definitive significance (which, as we have just seen, is Church doctrine)? C.S. Lewis may be able to help us here. In his book *Mere Christianity*, he discusses the importance of making the correct choices:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself.⁶⁹

Lewis is not primarily making a Christian or theological point here; he is, rather, stating a fact about character formation. A fact, moreover, that had already been noticed by Aristotle.⁷⁰ We form our character through our acts, and once we have a specific character, acts that are incompatible with it become very hard, if not impossible, for us, whereas acts that fit this character come naturally to us. In this sense, the character we acquire has something definitive about it. If we apply this to Christ's preaching to those who refused to believe in the days of Noah, we can understand how, on the one hand, the state in which they died has decisive

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 82–83.

⁷⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a-b on virtues of character trans. by Terence Irwin: 'We learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders, for instance, by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.'

significance, while on the other, the preaching of Christ could still make a difference to them. Those who were skeptical about Noah's building of the ark in the biblical story obviously took the wrong side. But public wrongdoers are not always the evillest people. Immediately after the above quotation, Lewis discusses precisely this point, when he addresses an issue that always used to puzzle him about Christian writers:

They talk about mere sins of thought as if they were immensely important: and then they talk about the most frightful murders and treacheries as if you had only got to repent and all would be forgiven. But I have come to see that they are right. What they are always thinking of is the mark which the action leaves on that tiny central self which no one sees in this life but which each of us will have to endure – or enjoy – for ever. One man may be so placed that his anger sheds the blood of thousands, and another so placed that however angry he gets he will only be laughed at. But the little mark on the soul may be much the same in both. Each has done something to himself which, unless he repents, will make it harder for him to keep out of the rage next time he is tempted, and will make the rage worse when he does fall into it. Each of them, if he seriously turns to God, can have that twist in the central man straightened out again: each is, in the long run, doomed if he will not.

Applied to the 'unbelievers' in Noah's days, the mark on the soul that their skepticism has left need not mean that they are evil people. Even though they took the wrong side in this case, there may have been enough good in them to make them so open to the message of Christ when it reached them after their death, that this could make a difference to them. If Rahner is correct that 'the inner *telos* of every genuinely good and charitable act is oriented toward and presupposes God,'⁷¹ then the acts and character of these people may have disposed them to accept the message of Christ. In light of the biblical story of Noah, of course, it seems unlikely that this applies to all of the 'unbelievers' at the time, for in that case, the flood would not have been necessary.

The same logic of character formation can explain the analogous cases mentioned above. As for followers of other religions, it does not seem unlikely that even if they have never heard of Christ, some of them may have developed a character under the influence of their non-Christian religious beliefs that disposes them to accept the message of Christ. Something similar may apply to those to whom Christianity has been so

⁷¹ D'Costa, *Christianity*, 163, summarising a point made by Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,' in *Concerning Vatican Council II*, Theological Investigations 6 trans. by David John Bourke (New York: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 231–253.

misrepresented that it is not culturally available to them: their character may be genuinely good and thus *implicitly* directed towards God, a direction that can only become explicit after the Gospel has been preached to them. Finally, those who have been raised as Christians but have been put off by the unchristian behavior of Christians may also be genuinely directed toward the good even while explicitly rejecting Christianity. They may need a direct confrontation with Christ to become aware that while seemingly rejecting Christ, they had, in fact, not been rejecting Christ himself, but misrepresentations of him by unworthy Christians. Note that in all these cases the earthly lives of those involved have decisive significance: if they had not been directed towards the good, they would not have engendered openness towards Christ after death. On the other hand, in all these cases redemption is only achieved through Christ, even if the confrontation with Christ took place after death.

In summary, several conclusions can be drawn from the doctrine of the descent into the realm of the dead. (1) Jesus did not undergo some form of near-death experience; He really died. This also implies that when Jesus rose, this was a real resurrection, not the resuscitation of someone who was only apparently dead. (2) Jesus descended into the realm of the dead with the aim of redeeming those who were there. The contingencies of people's birth will not withhold Christ from reaching those who live chronologically after Christ, but analogically before him, with his offer of salvation: the just followers of other religions, just non-believers from (sub)cultures in which Christianity was no living option, and, finally, those who have been put off Christ by unworthy Christians. (3) The descent was a continuation of Jesus' suffering, and it was through suffering that Jesus was victorious. The descent to the dead is part of the Christian answer to suffering; in and through his suffering, Christ not only opened himself to human suffering but also made it possible for his followers to share in his victorious suffering. Confessing the Creed may not necessarily imply a commitment to accepting one's own suffering in this way as meaningful, but it does as it were unlock this possibility.

I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus on the Third Day

1. Introduction: On the Third Day

‘On the third day he rose again,’ the Creed claims. *Tertia die resurrexit a mortuis*. This is the first of two times that the resurrection is mentioned in the Creed. Towards the end, the Creed also mentions the resurrection of the body. We will discuss this second mention of the resurrection later. It is not about the resurrection of Jesus but about the resurrection of the Christians who pray the Creed. That belief, however, is rooted in the resurrection of Christ. The reason to mention it here is that it makes explicit something that is left implicit here: the *bodily* aspect of the resurrection.

It is left implicit here, but it is not absent. This becomes clear when we ask ourselves why the Creed adds that Jesus rose ‘on the third day.’ The source of this information is quite clear: both Paul and the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke mention this (1 Cor. 15:4; Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22). But what does it mean? If we take it at face-value, the third day refers to a moment in time. Jesus was crucified on Friday and rose on the early Sunday morning. How did the Bible writers know that Jesus rose on the early Sunday morning? The answer to this question is necessarily indirect since there are no witnesses to the resurrection itself. Nobody saw Jesus rise. In the absence of witnesses of the resurrection itself, three answers are possible, and all three of them have been given:

- 1) The first explanation of ‘the third day’ is based on what Paul says in 1 Corinthians. He adds ‘in accordance with the scriptures.’ Could the mention of the third day as the day on which Jesus rose perhaps be explained by a wish of Jewish Christians to recount Jesus’ life in such a way that it became clear to their fellow Jews that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection fulfill prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures? In that case, that the resurrection took place on the third day would be part of a narrative grid imported from the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ If this is

¹ H.J. de Jonge, ‘Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van het geloof in Jezus’ opstanding,’ in: F.O. van Gennep a.o., *Waarlijk opgestaan: Een discussie over de opstanding van Jezus Christus* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1989), 31–50, 40.

the case, we should be able to identify the specific texts that have influenced this motif. The Bible texts mentioned in this connection are Hosea 6:2 and Jonah 1:17. Jonah is mentioned in Matt. 12:40: 'For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.' The problem with this explanation of 'on the third day' is that if this were a later, literary construction based on Jonah, one would expect a resurrection on the fourth day; after all, Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days. Therefore, it is unlikely that 'the third day' is a literary construction based on Jonah. That 'the third day' is a literary construction on the basis of the Hosea text is unlikely for another reason: it is not quoted in the New Testament in this context and is not associated with the resurrection until Tertullian.² Finally, there is an additional indication that the tradition that Jesus rose on the third day is ancient, and thus not a later literary construction: the fact that the breaking of bread (eucharist) took from the earliest days place on Sunday can only be explained from the belief that this was the day of the resurrection.³ Therefore, while it is clear that Paul and the gospels writers saw in the third day a Scripture fulfillment, it is most unlikely that it is a literary construction.⁴

² Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 13.

³ Detailed argumentation in Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 163-170, who points, among other things, to Acts 20:7 and Rev. 1:10. See also N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 579-580. Henk Jan de Jonge rejects the connection between the celebration of the eucharist on Sunday and the resurrection because the connection between the two is explicitly mentioned only as late as Ignatius, Barnabas, and Justin Martyr. He agrees with Swinburne that from the beginning the Lord's Supper took place on Sunday evening but notes that the celebration on Sunday morning is a later development, which cannot be traced back to the Sunday evening celebrations. See Henk Jan de Jonge, 'The Early History of the Lord's Supper,' in: Jan Willem van Henten & Anton Houtepen (eds.), *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 228-229. See also Dietrich-Alex Koch, 'The Early History of the Lord's Supper: A Response to Henk Jan de Jonge,' in: Van Henten & Houtepen (eds.), *Religious Identity*, 238-252, who argues against De Jonge that the resurrection on the first day was presumably indeed the reason for the celebration of the Lord's Supper on the first day.

⁴ See William Lane Craig, 'The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus,' *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 44-50, Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Ablauf der Osterereignisse und das leere Grab* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1958), 11-12 and Swinburne, *Resurrection*, 165-167.

- 2) The second explanation of ‘on the third day’ is based on the fact that on that day, the grave was empty; that is to say, Jesus’ body had disappeared. This explanation finds support in the gospels. In the gospel that by contemporary exegetes is often viewed as the oldest gospel, Mark, it is narrated how Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the grave to anoint Jesus very early in the morning on the first day of the week. They discover that the grave is empty, and a young man in a white robe tells them that Jesus has risen (Mark 16:1–6). Similar stories can be found in the other gospels; in fact, in all four gospels, a visit to the empty grave precedes the appearances of Christ (Matt. 28:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–10). Nevertheless, contemporary exegetes often consider the stories about the empty grave as later, secondary traditions. The Dutch exegete Henk-Jan de Jonge explains why:

The older documents, especially Paul’s, take Jesus for resurrected and lifted up into heaven without assuming that his earthly body has left the grave. [...] It is the later documents, from 70 A.D. and onwards, that tell us about people who found Jesus’ grave empty. [...] This story, of Mark [which is then dated around 70 – MS] and adopted by Matthew and Luke, [...] was until the years 60–70 less known than were the reports about Jesus’ resurrection without an empty grave. [...] Here, the historian will have to choose and will, without any trouble, choose for the older conception.⁵

De Jonge argues that in accordance with Jewish beliefs about the resurrection of martyrs, Paul, the earliest writer of the New Testament and our earliest source for the resurrection, held the opinion that Jesus, three days after his death, rose and ascended to heaven in a new, spiritual body. According to De Jonge, in the first Letter to the Corinthians, even when Paul wants to prove the resurrection from the dead and uses Jesus’ resurrection as a possible proof, ‘the idea did not occur to Paul to supply the best possible proof, namely the ascertained emptiness of Jesus’ grave’ (34).

In answer to this position, we need to say three things. *Firstly*, there are good reasons not to accept that Paul is the earliest author of the New Testament. The late dating of the gospels in mainstream exegesis (after 70 CE) is problematic in light of Christian faith since it is based on the fact that Jesus’ announcement of the fall of the temple must be a *vaticinium ex eventu*. That is, it must be a prophecy written

⁵ De Jonge, ‘Ontstaan en ontwikkeling,’ 33 (our translation – MS). Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 334–346.

by the gospel writer after the event that is announced had taken place. The presupposition is, of course, that Jesus cannot have had real foreknowledge, and this presupposition is problematic in light of the Christian belief that Jesus is God.⁶ *Secondly*, even if, for the sake of the argument, we accept that Paul is the oldest author, the argument that since Paul does not mention the empty grave, he cannot have believed in it, remains problematic. This is a clear example of the fallacy which is called *argumentum e silentio* (argument from silence) in logic.⁷ We know of this fallacy in two forms: (1) *acceptance* of a proposition because of its absence in an argument and (2) *denial* of the same proposition because of the same absence. From the fact that Paul does not explicitly mention the empty grave, one can draw two conflicting conclusions: either Paul had never heard of the empty grave, or he considered it so obvious a fact that he considered it unnecessary to mention it. On the ground of Paul's silence alone, neither of both conclusions can validly be drawn. We need supporting evidence. *Thirdly*, when we look for supporting evidence in Paul, it seems that he did know about and believe in the empty grave. In 1 Cor. 15:44, Paul describes the resurrection in the following terms: 'What is sown is a natural body, and what is raised is a spiritual body.' By calling the earthly body a seed that God raised (in a transformed mode) in the resurrection, Paul suggests that Jesus' resurrected body originated from his earthly body and that his earthly body could no longer be found after the resurrection. Later on, in the same chapter (v. 52), Paul also suggests that the deceased who rise for the last judgment, are transformed, thus again suggesting that their corpses will no longer be there.⁸ On the basis of these clues, then, it seems unlikely that Paul did not know about or rejected belief in the empty grave.⁹ Since the four gospels in their canonical form also support the empty grave, this

⁶ For a rather balanced discussion of the issue from an exegetical perspective, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985), 14–25.

⁷ We owe this argument to prof. Luco J. van den Brom; cf. also Norman Kretzmann, 'Resurrection Resurrected: Comments on the Paper of Adela Yarbro Collins,' in: Eleonore Stump & Thomas P. Flint (eds.), *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind. 1993), 145; Craig, 'Historicity,' 39–67, 40–42.

⁸ Tjitze Baarda, "Als Christus niet is opgewekt...": Het Nieuwe Testament in het "Geding," *Kerk en Theologie* 42 (1991), 314, concludes from this text that Paul believed in an empty grave.

⁹ One could even argue that the fact that Paul does not use the phrase 'on the third day' strengthens his support for the empty grave, since his support seems independent from the tradition that uses this phrase.

makes the New Testament support for the empty grave quite strong.¹⁰ If we accept the connection between the phrase ‘on the third day’ and the empty grave, this phrase also serves to emphasize the bodily aspect of the resurrection.

- 3) The belief in the resurrection of Christ is primarily based on the appearances to his disciples. The empty grave by itself is not very convincing as proof of the resurrection; in most cases, an empty grave does not mean that the deceased has come to life again. One cannot, however, appear without being alive. ‘The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon,’ the eleven disciples told the two who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:34), and in the New Testament resurrection and appearances are almost always connected.¹¹ Thus, thirdly, the belief that Christ rose on the third day might also be supported by, if not based on, the fact that on that day the appearances began. It is important to note that also the appearances imply a *bodily* resurrection. The appearances do not occur in dreams but in real life, and it is in an embodied form that Jesus appears (cf. Luke 24:36–43; cf. 24:30–32).

We conclude, then, that there is a historical basis for the resurrection on the third day. Most likely, the empty grave and the appearances of the risen Christ together form this basis. It is because Jesus had risen on the third day that the Sunday – at the time a regular working day – became the day to celebrate the Eucharist. Once the Sunday had become the established day for eucharistic celebrations, this added to the significance of the fact that Jesus had risen on the third day. Thus, the clause ‘on the third day’ in the Creed emphasizes both the physical aspect of Jesus’ resurrection and the Sunday as day of the eucharist.

2. Confessing Jesus’ Resurrection

After the *tertia die*, the Creed continues with *resurrexit a mortuis*, translated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church as ‘he rose again.’ Let’s begin by noticing that this translation from Latin is incorrect and potentially misleading. Literally translated, both the Latin and the Greek text read *from the dead*. The idea is that after the resurrection, Jesus was no

¹⁰ There are more arguments for and against the empty grave. For a discussion of some of them, see our ‘The Ultimate Miracle? The Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus,’ *HTS Theological Studies* 70/1 (2014), Art. #2721.

¹¹ Cf. Baarda, “Als Christus niet is opgewekt,” 306, Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 346–360.

longer among the dead. The translation omits the *from the dead* and substitutes *again*. The problem with *again* is that it can in various ways be misunderstood. One uses *again*, firstly, 'to indicate that something happens a second time.'¹² In this sense, Jesus did not rise again. His resurrection was a unique event! One uses *again* also 'to indicate that something is now in a particular state or place that it used to be in.'¹³ It is in this second meaning that *again* is used here: Jesus used to be alive, was killed, and through the resurrection became alive once more (cf. Rom. 6:10; Rev. 1:18; 2:8). The becoming alive again of Jesus, however, is not a mere return to his former state. As we have seen above, the body in which Jesus rose, while numerically identical to his body before his death, was not in other respects identical to it. It was a *transformed* body. The numerical identity is emphasized in the story of the doubting Thomas, which makes clear that the resurrected body is material (John 19:24–29; see also Luke 24:39–40; John 19:20) and carries the marks of the crucifixion. The transformation is emphasized in the resurrection stories in which the disciples do not recognize their risen Lord (Luke 24:13–49; John 20:14–18). Thus, the *again* is correct only if we understand by it that Jesus is *again* alive, though the mode in which He is alive is different from his life before the crucifixion.

On the other hand, *a mortuis*, 'from the dead,' follows naturally on what the Creed confesses about Jesus' descent to the dead. The idea is, obviously, that Jesus leaves the realm of the dead to which He had descended. This phrase is about the state Jesus leaves behind at the resurrection rather than about the state he enters by the resurrection.

Until now, we have approached the resurrection indirectly, by discussing *on the third day* and *again*. In this way, we already have arrived at some important conclusions. These can be summarized in four points:

- (1) Jesus, who had died, has come to life.
He who was carried into the grave as a corpse, walked out of it.
- (2) After the resurrection, Jesus' grave was empty.
- (3) Jesus' resurrected body is shaped by a transformation of his earthly body, and between the two there is both continuity and discontinuity.
- (4) After the resurrection Jesus appeared to many.

¹² John Sinclair (ed.), *Collins Cobuild Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, ³2001), 29. That this is the first meaning of 'again' in *Collins Cobuild* is relevant because *Collins Cobuild* presents the meanings words in the order of frequency in which they occur.

¹³ Sinclair (ed.), *Collins Cobuild*, 29.

Aspects (1) and (3) concern what happened at the resurrection (Jesus, who was dead, came to life, whereby his mortal remains were transformed), while aspects (2) and (4) basically concern the empirical data: the grave was empty, and Jesus appeared to many.

The resurrection is of central importance to the Christian faith. Paul is adamant about this: 'if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith. What is more, we have proved to be false witnesses to God, for testifying against God that he raised Christ to life when he did not raise him' (1 Cor. 15:14-15a). Not only Paul's own witness but also the whole Christian faith rests upon the resurrection of Jesus.

In this view, Paul does not stand alone in the Christian tradition. Other miracles might be understood symbolically and remain meaningful even if they did not actually happen, but in the case of the resurrection, this is questionable. Symbolic interpretations of the resurrection have been attempted: the resurrection narratives would, in fact, concern the experience of God's forgiving grace by Jesus' disciples after his death¹⁴ or the communal experiences of Jesus' disciples after his death.¹⁵

Such interpretations meet with two important objections. Firstly, it seems that at the crucifixion, not only did the disciples abandon Jesus, but God did the same. Jesus was God-forsaken. It is not until the resurrection that it becomes clear that God did support Jesus through it all. As Paul phrases it in Romans: Jesus 'was designated Son of God in power by resurrection from the dead' (1:4). In and through the resurrection, God rehabilitates Jesus.¹⁶ If the resurrection had been an experience of his disciples rather than of Jesus himself, the resurrection would not have rehabilitated him.

Secondly, God asserts his ultimate power in the resurrection. Human beings can bring Jesus into the grave, but they cannot keep him there. God's non-intervention at the crucifixion did not spring from lack of power. In this manner, the resurrection inspires hope: hope for the resurrection of individual Christians after death (cf. 2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Thess. 4:14; Rev. 1:18), and hope for the transformation of creation, a new heaven and a new earth, at the end of times (cf. Acts 17:31). Without the resurrection, we would have no ground to believe that God would be able and willing to intervene in the eschaton.

¹⁴ See, for example: Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*.

¹⁵ See, for example: Wil J. Veldhuis, *Over Jezus gesproken... Een oud verhaal dat verder gaat* (Hilversum: Gooi & Sticht, ⁴1978).

¹⁶ Baarda, "Als Christus niet is opgewekt," 314, 316.

Thus, the veracity of the resurrection is the guarantee for (1) the reliability of Jesus as God's chosen messenger, (2) the conviction that God has influence on the lives of individual persons and on the course of history, even when this is not apparent, and (3) the hope for the resurrection of individual Christians after their death.

By this interpretation of the resurrection, we make explicit two things that may easily be missed at a superficial reading of the Creed: the resurrection is an act of God, and more specifically a miracle. The reason that it is so easy to miss this is the down-to-earth, active way in which it is phrased: on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. It is almost as if He left his sickbed after a short illness. Only the qualifier 'from the dead' makes clear that there is more to it than this.

When we look at the New Testament, we find that besides 'to rise' with Jesus as subject (12 times in the NT; e.g., Mark 8:31) also 'to raise' with God as subject (6 times in the NT; e.g., Acts 2:24) is used. Most frequently, however, we find the passive form 'is/was raised.' In these cases, it is implicitly assumed that God is the one who raises Jesus: exegetes call this form a *passivum divinum*.¹⁷ When we discussed what the Creed confesses about God as Creator, we referred to the trinitarian principle *Opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: when God acts, all three persons of the Trinity are involved, though not in the same way. The way that the New Testament refers to that, implies that both the Father (raising) and the Son (rising) are involved. That the Father raised his Son *through the Holy Spirit* is articulated less clearly but certainly implied (Rom. 8:11, 1 Peter 3:18). The resurrection, then, is a truly trinitarian act of God and even a miracle. We will explain these concepts in two excursuses: on divine agency and on miracles.

EXCURSUS: DIVINE AGENCY

The God of the Bible is a God who acts.¹⁸ The coming into existence of the universe is an act of God (creation), and so is the continuing existence of the universe (continuous creation). Moreover, God does not bring the world into existence to let it go its own way; He remains intimately

¹⁷ Wim Weren, 'De macht van de dood en de kracht van God: Enkele Bijbelse perspectieven', *HTS Theological Studies* 68/1 (2012), 6.

¹⁸ Terence E. Fretheim, 'The God Who Acts: An Old Testament Perspective,' *Theology Today* 54 (1997), 6-18.

and actively involved in his creation. This inner-worldly divine agency takes place at various levels: by inspiring people (like Noah, Abram, Moses, the prophets, Paul, etc.), by influencing nature in ways that we would not consider miraculous (e.g., Amos 4:6–10), and by acting in miraculous ways (e.g., Israel crossing the Red Sea and Jesus rising from the grave).¹⁹

That God intervenes in human lives and world history (interventionism) has always been a Christian belief. Contemporary Western Christianity, however, is strongly inclined to question this belief. There are two reasons for this: (1) the belief that God *cannot* act in the world, and (2) the belief that God *should not* act in the world. As to the first of these reasons, many Western people believe that science will ultimately be able to explain everything that happens in the world. In a universe governed by natural laws, there is no room for supernatural agency. The progress of science has made it clear that many things for which people in the past held God responsible (illnesses, natural disasters) have natural causes. Atheist scientists and philosophers have argued that supernatural agency is impossible, and many Christian theologians have followed suit by reinterpreting divine agency. Maurice Wiles, for example, denies special divine agency (broadly speaking, interventionist agency) and claims that there is one all-embracing action of God: the continuous creation of the world.²⁰

It has conclusively been shown, however, that the idea of a closed world (a world in which supernatural intervention is impossible) and the concomitant perceived impossibility of special divine agency are not the outcome of contemporary empirical scientific research. They are part of the cultural metanarrative Charles Taylor has called *the immanent frame*, weaving ‘together a number of themes, including the disenchantment of the world, an understanding of nature as an impersonal order, the rise of an “exclusive humanism,” and an ethics which is framed primarily in terms of discipline, rules, and norms.’²¹ This metanarrative, which distinguishes sharply between the natural and the supernatural and leaves

¹⁹ We are aware that there are non-miraculous reinterpretations of both the exodus and the resurrection of Christ, but do not consider these convincing. With respect to the resurrection, we have summarized the arguments above.

²⁰ Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986* (London: SCM Press 1986), esp. 28, 93, 113, 107–108.

²¹ Alister E. McGrath, ‘Hesitations About Special Divine Action: Reflections on Some Scientific, Cultural and Theological Concerns,’ *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7/4 (Winter 2015), 8. Taylor has presented his thoughts on the immanent frame in his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 539–593.

room for the first only both in its view of humanity and of the natural world, has become a *presupposition* of science in the form of *methodological naturalism*, which *a priori* excludes supernatural explanations in science and admits natural explanations only.²² A presupposition of research, however, is quite something different from an outcome of that research. *Presuppositions* of science can never be proven or disproven in science itself. And if someone pointed out that they become more plausible when they proved fruitful – which is correct – even that would not count against the Christian faith. Originally, the whole idea that nature has an internal lawlike rationality, which we can discover by empirical research, goes back to the idea that nature is not just nature but is the creation of a rational God. The metaphysical background of methodological naturalism lies in metaphysical theism, not in metaphysical atheism, then.²³

That science does not give us a reason to reject the possibility of special divine agency is also shown by the outcomes of the science and religion debate on this issue. In a recent survey, Alister McGrath has shown that there are at least five different models of divine agency that seem to be viable: (1) the quantum theory model, (2) the complexity model, (3) the chaos theory model, (4) the Thomist model, and (5) the Pentecostal model.²⁴ Each of these models aims to show *how* divine agency works. For our purposes here, it is not necessary to discuss these models.

We need not show how God can act, but merely make plausible *that* God can act. The best way to do that is by means of an analogy.²⁵ Some scientists believe in a universe in which everything, including human actions we experience as free, is determined by antecedent conditions. In ordinary life, and in our moral judgment of human actions, we do not accept this extreme position. Instead, we believe in libertarian free will: given the circumstances, human agents will be able to take more than one possible course of action. In other words, they will have real alternatives.

Those who accept that human beings have libertarian free will assume that mind can act on matter. By mental decisions humans can perform basic actions (actions not caused by other actions one performs).²⁶

²² On methodological naturalism, see our *De goddeloosheid van de wetenschap: Theologie, geloof en het gangbare wetenschapsideaal* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006), 9–12.

²³ See Sarot, *De goddeloosheid van de wetenschap*, 117–121, 132–134.

²⁴ McGrath, 'Hesitations,' esp. 13–14.

²⁵ For this analogy, see Mats J. Hansson, *Understanding an Act of God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1991), 100–103.

²⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* (Cambridge: CUP 1973).

If finite human minds are able to perform basic actions – in their case, these would always be bodily movements – would an infinite mind not be able to do this as well? And if this infinite mind is not embodied, is it not conceivable that it would be able to do so wherever it wants to, in the universe it has created, parallel to the way human minds act on human bodies?²⁷

If there is no convincing evidence God cannot act in the world, we might have a look at the reasons that have been given why God *should* not act in the world. These have to do with two values that are very important in contemporary Western culture: human autonomy and privacy. Autonomy has to do with self-government. For individuals, this means being master over one's own life; for states, it means being master over one's own territory, etc. The existence of a divine or supernatural agent is sometimes perceived as incompatible with human autonomy because it means that there is a higher authority above humanity involved in governing the world. If God is omniscient, moreover, and knows us and our motives better even than we know ourselves, this seems to be at odds with the privacy to which we attach so much value in the West nowadays. These normative objections to special divine agency may well be part of the reason why the cultural metanarrative of the immanent frame meets with so much acceptance. In the words of Michael Rota:

There is a certain frame of mind that results in one's seeing the existence of God not as good news but as a threat to one's own plans and one's own autonomy. The news that God exists, if I am in this mindset, would strike me as bad news, because it would mean that there is a person who has the right to tell me what to do, who knows all of my actions, and who will judge me and punish me if I do not do what he wants rather than what I want.²⁸

It might be argued that this frame of mind has become quite widespread in the West in our time. From a Christian perspective, two reactions are in place. Firstly, this frame of mind presupposes that God is like another human being and is a possible rival for human beings, and does not take into account that God exists, as we have seen in our discussion of God as Creator, at a different level: He is the ground of being rather than a

²⁷ Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

²⁸ Michael Rota, 'The Problem of Evil and Cooperation,' in: Martin A. Novak & Sarah Coakley (eds.), *Evolution, Games, and God: The Principle of Cooperation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013), 368–369. See also Kurt Koch, *Die Kirche Gottes: Gemeinschaft im Geheimnis des Glaubens* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2007), 178.

being.²⁹ Therefore God can never be a rival of created beings. And secondly, from a Christian perspective, we would argue that while autonomy and privacy are real and important values, they are not *absolute* values and have limited validity only.³⁰

EXCURSUS:
MIRACLES

Both in the early church and in the interpretation we have given Jesus' resurrection 'becomes the ultimate miracle in the series of miracles that marks his earthly ministry.'³¹ Miracles have been both overrated and underrated, and the discussion on them continues. They are overrated when they are seen as objective proofs of the Christian faith, and they are underrated when they are seen as scientifically impossible or so implausible that it is never rational to accept that a miracle has taken place (David Hume).

Strictly speaking, one can only speak of a miracle when two conditions are met: (1) an event took place that cannot be explained by any known laws of physics, and even seems to contradict them (in scientific terms: an anomaly); (2) from a believers' point of view, this event can be understood as an intentional act of God.³² Miracles can be seen only with the eyes of faith. Imagine red wine coming out of the showerhead instead of water. We would probably experience that as scary. Imagine, moreover, that on closer scrutiny no scientific explanation could be found. We would then speak of an anomaly, and if these things would happen more often, we would perhaps say: 'We are haunted!' That is not our reaction to the wedding in Cana, where Jesus changed water into wine. There, we speak of a miracle, because we ascribe the anomaly to an act of God through Jesus, in answer to a request and with the purpose of helping

²⁹ This is, of course, Paul Tillich's term, but it can be understood as a contemporary rendering of Aquinas's *ipsum esse subsistens*.

³⁰ Cf., e.g., Kenneth E. Himma, 'Privacy Versus Security: Why Privacy is Not an Absolute Value or Right,' *San Diego Law Review* 44 (2007), 857–920; Susan M. Shell, *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009).

³¹ John A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 293. See also Ashwin-Siejkowski, *The Apostles' Creed*, 63.

³² Cf. R.F. Holland, 'The Miraculous,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), 43–51.

the bridegroom (and at the same time making something clear about Jesus' mission). Both aspects, the anomaly-aspect and the intentional-act-of-God-aspect,³³ are necessary conditions to speak of a miracle in a strict sense. This means that it is not possible – as traditional apologetics has often done – to use miracles to prove the truth of the Christian faith. After all, a miracle presupposes an interpretation from the perspective of that faith. In the words of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye: 'It is for Christianity to justify miracles, not for miracles to justify Christianity.'³⁴

On its traditional interpretation, the resurrection is a miracle in the strict sense. For when a dead man comes to life, that is an anomaly, and with the eyes of faith, this anomaly can be seen as an intentional act of God.

Let's take stock. What are we doing when we confess that on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead? On a factual level, we express our belief that God brought it about that Jesus, after having died on the cross, regained life. His grave was empty, and his new body displayed both continuity and discontinuity with the body that entered his grave. This divine involvement both confirms the reliability of Jesus as God's chosen messenger and the conviction that God has influence on the lives of individual persons and on the course of history. God is stronger than death! By confessing this, the believer renounces the immanent frame and commits himself to a life in which God is intimately involved. If we combine the belief in the resurrection of Christ with a belief that we have not yet discussed since the Creed did not articulate it, the belief that the Church is the body of Christ, we commit ourselves to – as a community – embodying Christ in the world.

³³ On the intentional-act-of-God-aspect, see Thomas Rutherford, 'The Credibility of Miracles Defended against the Author of Philosophical Essays,' in: Stanley Tweyman (ed.), *Hume on Miracles* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 30–33.

³⁴ Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Een woord van toelichting naar aanleiding der recensie van Dr. A. Pierson over de inaugureele oratie van Dr. J.I. Doedes* (Leyden: De Breuk & Smits, 1859), 10.

I Believe in the Ascension and the Last Judgment

1. At the Right Hand

The Apostles' Creed connects 'He ascended into heaven' with 'and is seated at the right hand of the Father.' This connection goes back to Mark 16:19: 'And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven; there at the right hand of God he took his place.' The destination of the ascension is a seat at the right hand of God. What does that mean?

Being seated at God's right hand has a special meaning in Scripture: the place at the right hand is the place of honor. We can see this, for example, in Psalm 110:1: 'YHWH declared to my Lord, "Take your seat at my right hand, till I have made your enemies your footstool."' This text is applied very directly to Jesus in the Letter to the Hebrews, according to which Jesus 'has offered one single sacrifice for sins, and then taken his seat for ever, at the right hand of God, where he is now waiting till his enemies are made his footstool' (Hebr. 10:12–13).¹

In the case of Jesus, however, the place at the right hand is not just a place of honor for someone whose task has been completed and who may now retire from public life. Jesus' ascension does not mean that He will *rest* in God's presence. In the Old Testament, the right hand of God symbolizes God's power, as we can see, for example, in Exodus 15:6, 12: 'Your right hand, YHWH, wins glory by its strength, your right hand, YHWH, shatters your foes, [...] You stretched your right hand out, the earth swallowed them!' It is the right hand of God that is particularly associated with the power, strength, and efficacy of God. Thus, when it is said that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, it is also said that Jesus is 'at the centre of power.' We can think here of Psalm 47:5, 8 NASB: 'God has ascended with a shout, the Lord, with the sound of a trumpet. [...] God is king over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.' Here, ascension is directly linked to God's kingship over this earth. Paul makes a similar connection regarding the ascension of Jesus:

¹ Cf. Matt. 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42–43, Acts 2:34, Eph. 1:20–22 and also Matt. 26:64, 1 Cor. 15:25, Col. 3:1, Hebr. 8:1.

May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see [...] how extraordinarily great is the power that he has exercised for us believers; this accords with the strength of his power at work in Christ, the power which he exercised in raising him from the dead and enthroning him at his right hand, in heaven [...] He has put all things under his feet, and made him, as he is above all things, the head of the Church; which is his Body (Eph. 1:18a, 19–20, 22–23; cf. 1 Pet. 3:22).

In this text, it is abundantly clear that the fact that everything is put under Jesus' feet means not only that He has a place of honor but also that He has power: He has been appointed as the head of the Church, his body. By the way, by omitting 'omnipotent' from its translation of *sedet ad dexteram Patris omnipotentis*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes the connection between ascension and power less explicit.

EXCURSUS:

MORAL OBJECTIONS AGAINST THE POWER OF GOD IN THE WORLD

The Apostles' Creed mentions God's omnipotence twice, and above we have not only emphasized that God created the world, but also that God continues to act in the world, sometimes even by means of miracles. In our discussion of the ascension, moreover, we have emphasized that when we confess that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, this again implies a position of power. The more we emphasize the power of God, however, the more poignant the question of suffering becomes. If God has so much power over the world, why is there so much suffering? Why does God not intervene more often? Two complementary answers to this question present themselves. Firstly, if God would intervene to counteract suffering all the time, the regular, lawlike behavior of nature would come under pressure. It is the same qualities of water that allow us to drink water and drown in it. If when we are in danger of drowning, these qualities of water would change, this would undermine the regularity of nature. But it is the regularity of nature that enables us to make predictions and calculate probabilities. It is this regularity that enables us to learn from our mistakes and to increase our scientific knowledge. Altogether, we would be worse off with constant intervention from God, which would result in chaos, than with less frequent intervention, which does not really undermine order and regularity.² Thus, the fact that God

² Gijsbert van den Brink, 'Natural Evil and Eschatology,' in: Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco van den Brom & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Vincent Brümmer* (Kampen: Kok Pharos), 39–55.

has given us a world in which nature exhibits regularity is a reason for gratitude. If this is correct, it is not the finitude of God's resources, but the regularity of nature that sets a limit to God's interventions in nature, and one can understand why divine intervention must be the exception.

There is a second reason why divine intervention must be the exception, and that is given by John Hick. If it would be evident that God exists, if God were immediately present to us, this presence would be so overwhelming that it would undermine our freedom. 'How can a finite creature, dependent upon the infinite Creator for its very existence and for every power and quality of its being, possess any significant autonomy in relation to that Creator?', Hick asks. And his answer is:

The only way we can conceive is that suggested by our actual situation. God must set man at a distance from Himself. [...] The kind of distance between God and man that would make room for a degree of human autonomy is epistemic distance. In other words, the reality and presence of God must not be borne in upon men in the coercive way in which their natural environment forces itself upon their attention. The world must be to man, to some extent at least, *etsi deus non daretur*, 'as if there were no God.' God must be a hidden deity, veiled by His creation.³

The world, therefore, must be such that it is not clear that God exists. God's intervention may not be evident at first sight. The world should be 'religiously ambiguous,' both veiling and revealing God, veiling God to make possible human freedom and revealing God so that if in our freedom we come to believe in God, 'we become able to recognize all around us the signs of a divine presence and activity.'⁴ That is precisely the world in which we live.

2. Jesus' Ascension and the Mission of the Church

Paul links the thought of Christ as the head directly to the thought of the Church as the body of Christ: it is through the Church that Jesus is active in the world even after his ascension. The Church renders Jesus present in the world. Thus, the article on the ascension implicitly points towards the mission of the Church. The question is: can this mission be specified? How should the Church render Jesus present in the world? The answer to this question becomes clear, for example, from the conclusion of the Gospel of Mark:

Lastly, he showed himself to the Eleven themselves while they were at table. He reproached them for their incredulity and obstinacy, because

³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 281.

⁴ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 282.

they had refused to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. And he said to them, 'Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation.' And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven; there at the right hand of God he took his place, while they, going out, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:14–15, 19–20).⁵

The task Jesus has given to his disciples at the ascension to the Church is that of proclaiming the Gospel. The fact that Jesus is no longer himself proclaiming his message on earth is emphatically coupled with the assignment to his disciples to take over that task. Once one becomes aware of this linkage, it strikes us in more places. So, too, in the best-known Bible text on the ascension: 'As he said this he was lifted up while they looked on, and a cloud took him from their sight. They were still staring into the sky as he went, when suddenly two men in white were standing beside them, and they said, "Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you have seen him go to heaven"' (Acts 1:9–11). Immediately before this text Jesus says: 'But you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end' (Acts 1:8). Here also, Jesus commands the apostles to be his witnesses when he ascends to heaven. It is no coincidence that the Book of Acts, the book that tells the story of the spreading of the Gospel all over the world, begins with Jesus' ascension. A similar link is made, though in a different way, in the Gospel of John: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). After the ascension, Jesus will through the Church draw all people to himself. This does not just mean that the Church is to *preach* the gospel. Our task is broader: we should *embody* the gospel to render Jesus present in and to the world and to continue his work in the world.

Jesus' ascension does not only imply an assignment; it also implies a promise. Just like Jesus preceded his followers in his death and resurrection, He also precedes them in his ascension. The collect (opening prayer) for the Mass of the Feast of the Ascension in the Roman Missal puts it this way: 'The ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation!'⁶ Not only

⁵ Though most exegetes argue that this is not the original end of the Gospel of Mark, it certainly is early.

⁶ *The Roman Missal* ET of the 3rd typical edition (Washington: US Conference of Bishops, 2011), 432.

is Jesus' resurrection the ground for our hope of resurrection, his ascension is also the ground for our hope of heaven.

Finally, exegetes have been discussing the date of the resurrection of Jesus. The Catholic liturgy celebrates the ascension forty days after easter based on Acts 1:3, which seems to suggest a period of forty days between easter and ascension during which Jesus appeared to his disciples. The Gospels of Mark (16:19) and Luke (24:50) seem to suggest that the ascension took place on the same day as the resurrection, however. Some theologians go so far as to let resurrection and ascension coincide so that they are 'not [...] two distinct events but rather [...] two aspects of one message concerning Jesus' destiny and the fate of humankind.'⁷ The Creed does not support such a view, since it mentions both events separately. Henk Jan de Jonge has attempted to solve this issue by suggesting that Acts 1:3 should be read as a *flash forward*: it looks forward to what would happen after the ascension.⁸ If this interpretation is correct, the ascension took place at the end of easter day. We do not need to decide this issue here, however. The amount of time that elapsed between resurrection and ascension is theologically irrelevant. What is relevant is that they are two events separated by appearances of Jesus to his disciples, and forming part of a continuing history.

3. The Last Judgment

Immediately after having claimed that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, the Latin text of the Creed states: *inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos* ('from where He will come to judge the living and the dead'). The English translation obscures this connection by starting a

⁷ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 61.

⁸ Henk Jan de Jonge, 'The Chronology of the Ascension Stories in Luke and Acts,' *New Testament Studies* 59 (2013), 151–171. De Jonge shows convincingly that Luke uses the literary device he calls 'flash forward' also elsewhere: 3:19–20 and 6:16. In a flash forward, the author anticipates future developments by relating them at a moment in his narrative when these have not yet taken place. In this case, it would mean that Acts 1:4–8 gives the actual words of Jesus' instructions mentioned in Acts 1:2. The parallel text in Luke's Gospel, Luke 24, supports this interpretation. The insertion of verse 3 is explained by the fact that Luke 'wanted to preclude the idea that the apostles had seen Jesus only on his resurrection day and had received his instructions only at the supper of that evening. No, Jesus had convinced them that he lived by appearing to them, not on one day only, but repeatedly during the forty days from the day of his resurrection and ascension' (De Jonge, 'Chronology,' 162).

new sentence without the ‘from where’: ‘He will come again to judge the living and the dead.’ By doing so, it obscures once more – it did so before by omitting *omnipotens* from the translation – that the being seated at the right hand of the Father is an active position rather than a resting position.⁹

The *parousia* (second coming) is frequently mentioned in the New Testament¹⁰ and is often linked to the last judgment. And while in our days, ‘judgment’ is often seen as more terrifying than comforting, early Christians looked forward to it with longing: ‘Now be patient, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. Think of a farmer: how patiently he waits for the precious fruit of the ground until it has had the autumn rains and the spring rains! You too must be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord’s coming will be soon.’¹¹ That Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead is a promise, not a threat. This difference in perception has to do with the fact that while we associate judgment primarily with punishment, the Bible associates it with putting things right. Several authors have noticed that the Hebrew *mishpat* means both judgment and justice; it can be translated both by the Greek nouns *krisis* and *krima* (judgment) and by *dikaiosune* (righteousness). Judgment is about restoring justice, the elimination of injury, the defense of the weak, and the liberation of the oppressed.¹² God’s justice is restorative rather than retributive.¹³

We can now see for whom the last judgment is a promise. It is a promise, firstly, to the poor, to the abused, to the persecuted, to those who in life on earth did not get a fair chance. God is on their side and will do

⁹ The translation also adds ‘again,’ which is not in the Latin. As we noted on a previous occasion when the translation added ‘again,’ its first use is ‘to indicate that something happens a second time.’ Thus, the translation suggests that Jesus’ coming in judgment is his *second coming*. The New Testament does not speak in these terms. Like the Creed, it does not pair the return of Jesus to the earth with the incarnation, but with the ascension: ‘Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you have seen him go to heaven’ (Acts 1:11).

¹⁰ Matt. 24:29–31, 25:31–46, 1 Cor. 15:23, 1 Thess. 4:15, Hebr. 9:28, 2 Pet. 1:16, 3:4.12, 1 John 2:28.

¹¹ James 5:7–8; cf. 1. Cor. 1:7–8, Hebr. 9:28, 2 Pet. 3:12.

¹² José P. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), 109–199; Daniel L. Migliore, ‘From There He Will Come to Judge the Living and the Dead,’ in: Van Harn (ed.), *Exploring & Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, 179–181.

¹³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Life after Death: A New Approach to the Last Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 167–168; David Fergusson, ‘The Last Judgment,’ in: R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky & Justin Stratis (eds.), *Theological Theology: Essays in Honour of John B. Webster* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 85–86.

justice to them. It is a promise, moreover, to all those who cared for the people around them:

When the Son of Man comes [...], he will take his seat on his throne of glory. [...] He will separate people one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.' Then the upright will say to him in reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, lacking clothes and clothe you? When did we find you sick or in prison and go to see you?' And the King will answer, 'In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:31–32.33–40)

Many of those who did not expect it, will be saved. But are we not all sinners? Yes, we are.

If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright, so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil. [...] My children, I am writing this to prevent you from sinning; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the upright. He is the sacrifice to expiate our sins, and not only ours, but also those of the whole world (1 John 1:8–9, 2:1–2).

This, Augustine points out, means that Jesus, who at the cross has paid the price for our sins, will be our advocate; He will defend us. In other words, our advocate will be our judge!¹⁴

This does not mean that the coming judgment is no longer real or serious.¹⁵ The flipside of the justice that will be done to the good and the oppressed is that there will also be judgment in the sense of condemnation. If judgment is primarily putting right what has gone wrong, restoring the balance, punishment will sometimes be part of that. Some acts are evil, and too often, the wicked who perpetrate them flourish. The last judgment shall change that. Believing in the last judgment, then, also implies a commitment not to be among the wicked, a commitment to be 'innocent and free of any trace of guilt when the Day of Christ comes' (Phil. 1:10). Grace calls for a holy life.¹⁶

¹⁴ Augustine, *Sermon* 213:5.

¹⁵ Migliore, 'From There He Will Come,' 188.

¹⁶ Migliore, 'From There He Will Come,' 181–182.

The view that all vice and sin that is left unpunished in this life shall not be punished at all is incompatible with faith in the justice of God. This applies especially to the most heinous crimes, such as burning children alive in Auschwitz (to save gas!) or throwing newborns into the rubbish in communist China (excess due to population politics). This does not mean that justice requires that every wrong and all sin be punished. Nor does it mean that it is easy to distinguish between sins for which justice requires punishment and sins for which justice does not require it. It does not mean either that the punishment for any sin must be eternal; there are good reasons to assume otherwise. It merely means that some sins are so terrible that justice requires that, if they are not punished before death, they are punished after death. If death were the end, some evildoers could escape the consequences of their actions by ending their lives. It would be a negation of the weight of their crimes if the most wicked sinners could escape in this way; rather, they should at least be forced to face the consequences of their actions. A just God will take people's fundamentally wrong choices more seriously than they themselves do and will not allow them to run away from the consequences.¹⁷ And let's not forget that for the victims, this justice will not mean punishment, but justice and rehabilitation.

That Jesus will return from heaven to pronounce the last judgment also means that, ultimately, it is not up to us humans to judge. Paul writes, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"' (Rom. 12:19 NRSV). This means that when we, humans, punish – and it is unavoidable that parents sometimes punish their children, or the government sometimes punishes criminals – we may be moderate in those punishments, and we do not need to worry about whether our punishments are severe enough. We punish to educate or improve people, or to deter others. Sometimes there is also something of a retributive element in them, but we must not overdo it: not an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. God will do justice to everyone in the last judgment, we can trust in that. Theo de Wit has pointed out that it may well be that the diminished belief in a last judgment in the West is a major cause of the call for

¹⁷ Whether this means that some people will go to hell is a question we must leave to God. 'The eternal fire' has been 'prepared for the devil and his angels', not for humans (Matt. 25:41). But as the text just quoted also implies, we cannot exclude the possibility that some people will also end up there. In any case, 'eternal fire' is to be interpreted as an image, and it goes beyond an interpretation of the Creed to determine the exact meaning of the image.

increasingly severe punishments. Those who no longer trust in the last judgment may easily feel the need to take sufficient revenge themselves. Thus, belief in a divine last judgment may also have a civilizing function.¹⁸

By the way, not only the disappearance of belief in Jesus' return and the Last Judgment that can have a disastrous effect on human behavior. An unhealthily strong interest in the last things may also have harmful consequences. We see examples of this in the United States, where several Protestant groups are so fascinated by the second coming, what precedes it, and what follows it, that justice here and now becomes less important to them. After all, the world is coming to an end anyway. 'For many American Christians, this mode of thinking has resulted in gross indifference with regard to environmental issues.'¹⁹ We should avoid an interpretation of Biblical prophecies as detailed predictions of the future. Karl Rahner is among those who have warned against such 'pre-views of future events,' as if in Scripture we had journalistic reports of the end times.²⁰

Summarizing, when we confess our belief in the ascension and return of Jesus and in the last judgment, this confession is first of all about Jesus: after the resurrection, He did not die again but went to a place of honour in heaven, without ending his involvement in what happens on earth. When it comes to miraculous intervention, this involvement must necessarily be limited. Jesus also continues his work in the world, drawing all people to himself, through the community of those who believe in him, the Church. Confessing the ascension of Jesus, then, also means expressing our readiness to be involved in this work, our commitment to continuing the work of Jesus. And we do so in the expectation that even where we fail, in the last judgment Jesus will set things right – both for the victims of history, and for us who believe in him, and who may hope for heaven. In the end, God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). For now, this hope implies a commitment to a holy life.

¹⁸ Theo W.A. de Wit, "'Only God Can Judge Me': The Secularization of the Last Judgement," *Bijdragen* 72 (2011), 77–102.

¹⁹ Cornelis van der Kooi & Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 739.

²⁰ Karl Rahner, 'The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions,' in: Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 328.

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

1. Confessing Belief in the Holy Spirit

This is the second time that the Holy Spirit is explicitly mentioned in the Creed. In its second article, on Jesus, the Creed mentions that he was ‘conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ In our discussion of the Creed so far, we have mentioned the Spirit much more often. This has to do with the trinitarian principle *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*: the three persons of the Trinity always act together. Thus, when we discussed creation, we mentioned that the Son and the Spirit were involved in that as well.

Here, however, the Spirit is mentioned in a way that is different from the earlier mention. As we have seen above, the Creed has a trinitarian structure. In the Creed, we confess successively faith in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, his Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Here, therefore, it is articulated that faith in the Holy Spirit is on the same level as faith in God the Father and God the Son. As Augustine says in his explanation of the Creed: ‘Get such a clear understanding of the Holy Spirit that you will not believe Him to be less than the Father and less than the Son; for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make up the Trinity, one God.’¹

Augustine does not say much more about the Spirit. At first sight, this reflects the reticence of the Creed: it also claims no more about the Spirit than that He is holy and that we believe in him. Anyone who reads carefully will see, however, that just as the Creed mentions the works of the Father (creation) and the Son (e.g., the last judgment) in its confession of them, it also mentions the works of the Spirit in connection with its confession of the Spirit: the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and eternal life. The whole third article of the Creed is about the fruits of the Spirit. In this way, the Spirit, who is much less ‘tangible’ than the Son, is made somewhat tangible. Thus, when we discuss the holy catholic Church and

¹ Augustine, *Sermon 213:7*. Translation quoted from *Sermons for the Liturgical Seasons*.

the following items of faith confessed in the Creed, we should remember that we confess them *as actions of the Spirit*.²

Before we discuss these works of the Spirit, however, we should say something more about the Holy Spirit himself. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, which also means 'wind' and 'breath.' The *ruach* of God is the life-giving breath of God. This Spirit was involved in Creation ('the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind (*ruach*) sweeping over the waters' – Gen. 1:2), and also in the Creation of man: 'YHWH God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the *breath of life* into his nostrils, and man became a living being' (Gen. 2:7; italics mine – MS). Death can, therefore, also be described as the deprivation of the breath of life (Ps. 104:29). The Spirit of God can inspire people, both temporarily – as is the case with Samson (Judg. 13:25, 14:6, 19, 15:14) – and permanently. The latter is the case with Moses (Num. 11:17, 25). In the New Testament, too, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit, which is particularly associated with forgiveness of sins: 'After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained' (John 20:22–23).

If it is true that words take their meaning at least in part from the categories with which they are contrasted, the Biblical concept of spirit is quite different from ours. In practice, this means that the Bible associates Spirit with different things than we do. We contrast spirit with matter and body, and spiritual affairs (that have to do with religion and philosophy) with mundane affairs (that have to do with economy and politics). Not so the Bible. In the Bible, 'the contrast drawn is that between not-life, or lesser life, or life gone wrong, and life: true life, real life, God's life, and all creation's life in God.'³ That the Spirit gives life is explicitly mentioned in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, not in the Apostles' Creed.

Breath is something physical; without breath, our body cannot live. Spirit in the Biblical sense always rests upon something material: upon the waters, upon the body, upon the disciples, upon believers. When the Spirit overshadowed Mary, new life began in her and she became pregnant with Jesus: a biological process. At his baptism, the Spirit descended upon Jesus (Matt. 3:16, Mark 1:10). All in all, we may conclude from this 'that the Spirit has a proclivity for the material, in particular, the materiality of the body.'⁴

² See, e.g., Berkhof, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 11.

³ Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 85.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 13.

One of the best images of the working of the Holy Spirit in human beings is the musical instrument that is used in so many churches: the pipe organ.⁵ The blowing of wind itself does not produce music. Only when wind is blown into the pipes, the air starts to oscillate and produce a sound. So it is also with the Holy Spirit: it needs ‘matter,’ and especially embodied human beings to blow through, to bring to life, and to produce the works of God.

Among the human beings whom Christians hold to be inspired by the Spirit, the prophets hold pride of place: ‘No prophecy ever came from human initiative. When people spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them’ (2 Peter 1:21). When written down, these prophecies were also taken to be inspired, just like the rest of the Bible: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright’ (2 Tim. 3:16). Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), quoting this text, therefore speaks of ‘the Scripture of the Holy Spirit.’⁶ And because it is inspired, Scripture is seen both as living and as life-giving.

Among the most important offices ascribed to the Holy Spirit, sanctification should be mentioned. Cardinal Henry Edward Manning wrote in 1895:

Now God the Holy Ghost has the office of our sanctification; and the office of the Sanctifier is twofold. There is the work of the Holy Ghost in every individual soul from the beginning of the world; and that work of sanctification in each individual soul will continue to the end of the world. There is also the work of the Holy Ghost in the Mystical Body of Christ, that is His Church, which office began from the day of Pentecost, and will continue to the second advent of the Son of God.⁷

According to the Catholic tradition, the Spirit furthers the sanctification of individual people through its seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel (right judgment), fortitude (courage), knowledge, piety (reverence) and the fear of the Lord (CCC 1831, based on Isa. 11:2-3). But that is not all, for following on these gifts there are twelve fruits of the Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity (CCC 1832, based mainly on Gal. 5:22–23). Moreover, the Spirit also works through the cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and charity. In its discussion of the works of the Spirit,

⁵ For this image, see Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 85.

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* VII 1.

⁷ Henry Edward Manning, *The Internal Mission of the Holy Ghost* (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1904), 14.

however, the Creed begins with two communal works of the Spirit in the communion: the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints. By doing so, the creed avoids a pitfall of much theology of the first half of the twentieth century, which concentrated entirely on the workings of the Spirit in the individual believer, and separated pneumatology from ecclesiology.⁸

By confessing the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to opening ourselves up to the Spirit, so that the Spirit can work through us. Let us now have a closer look at what the Creed identifies as the actions of the Spirit. Hendrikus Berkhof remarked about the final article of the Creed that ‘there is no doubt about the order: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of Saints; the forgiveness of sins.” We can assume that in these articles the Spirit is conceived of as giving and controlling what is mentioned after him: church, community, forgiveness. All these are fruits of the Spirit. And the collective fruits come first, after that the blessing of the individual with the forgiveness of his sins.’⁹ Let’s move on, then, to the first collective fruit: the Holy Catholic Church.

2. Confessing Belief in the Holiness of the Church

The confession that the Church is holy meets with much resistance and has done so for a long time. Over the centuries, there have been so many wrongs in the Church that one can sometimes hear Catholics joke that the best proof of the existence of God is that despite all its wrongs, after twenty centuries the Church still exists. ‘Holy’ is not the first word that would come to most outsiders when asked to give a fair description of the Catholic Church. Nor of any other church, by the way. This is no new phenomenon. We have seen above how from the sixth century onwards, many manuscripts of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed omit ‘holy.’¹⁰ This resistance against calling the church holy presupposes that the term ‘holy’ means something like ‘completely good.’ This is the meaning that the term has acquired in contemporary English.¹¹

⁸ Elisabeth T. Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 7.

⁹ Berkhof, *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 42.

¹⁰ See above 9–10.

¹¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* trans. by John W. Harvey (Oxford: OUP, 1950), 5.

Yet the tradition of calling the church *hagia* ('holy') is very old. We find a first instance of it already in the New Testament, where the church is called a 'holy nation' (1 Pet. 2:9) and where, moreover, Christians in general (and not only the exceptionally devout ones) are called *hagioi* ('holy ones' or 'saints'; Acts 9:32, Eph. 1:1; cf. Jude 1:3). This obviously does not imply that their lives are perfect or exemplary. In order to understand what then is meant by calling Christians (and the church) holy, we must have a look at the use of the term 'holy' in the Bible. Holiness belongs primarily to God. We have already seen that the Spirit is called 'holy'; the same applies to the Father (e.g., Isa. 6:3, John 17:11) and the Son (e.g., Mark 1:24). The classic analysis of God's holiness has been given by Rudolf Otto. On this analysis, to call God 'holy' is to say that He is the 'numinous,' the *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*: the mystery that fascinates us even if it causes us to tremble with fear. It causes us to tremble with fear because we are completely dependent on it (Gen. 18:27), it is majestic, passionate, and, if one does not show due respect, dangerous (1 Sam. 6:20).¹² It is mysterious because it is beyond our understanding,¹³ which, by the way, adds to its awefulness. But it is also fascinating: 'it is the highest, strongest, best, loveliest, and dearest that man can think of' and draws humans to itself.¹⁴ Abraham J. Heschel has shown that contrary to Otto's analysis, the Holy in the Bible is not the wholly other. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the 'Holy One of Israel' is a standing phrase.¹⁵ 'The Wholly Other stands outside all relations to man, whereas the very genitive "the Holy One of Israel" suggests the relatedness of God.'¹⁶ God is not merely transcendent, He is also passionately involved with his people, Israel. This fits well with our observation above that in the Bible the Spirit has a predisposition towards the material.

From this first meaning of 'holy,' a second meaning was derived: everything that was not God but was connected to him in some way or

¹² Otto, *The Holy*, 8–24.

¹³ Otto, *The Holy*, 25–30. God is beyond our understanding not because God is *irrational* but because He is *suprarational*: our limited cognitive faculties do not suffice to understand God. That is not to say that we cannot have knowledge of God. See Anselm, *Proslogion* 15, and our 'Rational Theology and the Transcendence of God,' in: Henri A. Krop, Arie L. Molendijk & Hent de Vries (eds.), *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 251–263.

¹⁴ Otto, *The Holy*, 39.

¹⁵ It appears altogether approximately 45 times in the Old Testament, mostly (25 times) in Isaiah.

¹⁶ Heschel, *The Prophets*, 293.

other or was reserved for God and his sacred service was called 'holy.' In this sense, the Arc of the Covenant was holy; in it, God was present in Israel, and therefore, it shared in God's awefulness. Touching it (2 Sam. 6:6–7), yes even looking at it (1 Sam. 6:19), could mean one's death. It was kept in the most holy place, first the Tabernacle, and later the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. In a similar sense, one might argue that Christians are holy and the Church is holy: they are set apart for God's holy service, in the liturgy and especially in the Eucharist and the other sacraments. The second form of holiness, then, is ritual or liturgical in character.

From this second meaning of 'holy,' a third meaning developed when the Old Testament prophets made it clear that God does not appreciate cultic service without righteousness: 'faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not burnt offerings' (Hos. 6:6).¹⁷ Cultic purity is nothing when the Church does not properly fulfill the task of being (and this is the third meaning of 'holy') righteous and without sin (cf. Eph. 1:4, 2 Tim. 1:9). The church does not have to fulfill that commission entirely on its own: Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to cleanse her, cleansing her with (baptismal) water and words (of proclamation) (Eph. 5:25–26). The third meaning of 'holy,' then, is moral in character.

Both in the ritual sense of holiness and in its moral sense, the Church falls short of its vocation. The Church is called to worship God, but in practice, many Christians do not even weekly go to Church, are lacking in devotion when they do so, and have a limited prayer life. Moreover, most Christians live lives that are morally far from perfect. On top of the imperfections of individual believers, the Church as an institution is also far from perfect. The Crusades, the Borgia popes, indulgences, the Inquisition, and sexual abuse are obvious examples. The shortcomings of the Church are more pervasive than these obvious examples, however. In recent years, pope Francis has chided the Church for its clericalism, its Pelagianism (trying to earn salvation by ritual perfection rather than by trusting in God's grace), its lukewarm commitment to justice for our neighbors and care for our common home, the earth, for its failure to give women the place they deserve, its lack of synodality, and for failing to listen with sufficient attention to the Holy Spirit. It is quite a list! When we confess the holiness of the church, then, we state a fact (the Church has been set apart for God's service, both in a moral and in a liturgical sense) and confess a commitment (we want to fulfill that

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., 1 Sam. 15:22, Psalm 51:15, Prov. 21:3, Micah 6:6–8, Matt. 9:13, 12:7, Romans 12:1.

service, not only liturgically but also in our lives, and not only individually, but also institutionally). We do not, however, deny the present imperfection and even sinfulness of the Church.

Pope Francis calls on the Church to listen to the Holy Spirit. There can be no doubt that the sanctification of the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without Spirit no Church. In the words of Augustine: ‘What the soul is to the human body, the Holy Spirit is to the body of Christ, which is the Church. The Holy Spirit does in the whole Church what the soul does in all the parts of one body.’¹⁸ Thus, the Holy Spirit works through the Church as an institution and through the individual believers within that institution.¹⁹

3. Confessing Belief in the Church

It seems strange to discuss the holiness of the Church first, and only after that the Church itself. There are two reasons for doing so. Firstly, one might argue that we should have discussed holiness even earlier, namely, when discussing the *Holy Spirit*. Thus, we had a debt to repay. Secondly, here we simply follow the word order of the Latin text of the Creed, *sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam*. Now, however, it is time to move on to the Church. The Greek word for Church, *ekklesia*, is the term used by the translators of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew *qahal*. Both the Hebrew root *qahal* and the Greek verb *ekkaleo* originally mean *to summon to a meeting*, though in most cases *ekklesia* and *qahal* are used for the result of this summons (the actual meeting) rather than for the summons itself.²⁰ *Qahal* refers to large assemblies of people, for example, the great multitude with whom King Solomon celebrated after the consecration of the temple (1 Kings 8:65), or the assembly of the Israelites when they received the Ten Commandments (Deut. 9:10). Originally, it was not a liturgical or cultic term. However, its application to the assembly at which the Ten Commandments were

¹⁸ Augustine, *Sermon* 267:4. Included in: Augustine, *Sermons 230–272B on the Liturgical Seasons* trans. by Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993). Cf. 1 Cor. 12:13.

¹⁹ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical on the Holy Spirit *Divinum illud munus* (Rome 9 May 1897), 6–7. See also John 7: 38–39.

²⁰ For *ekklesia*, see Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 632. For *qahal*, see Ludwig Koehler & Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* Vol. III (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1078–1080.

received took on cultic connotations in the course of time. This is mirrored in the use of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. For example, in Acts 7:38, where Stephen recounts the giving of the ten commandments, he uses the term *ekklesia*, and he gives Moses an almost priestly function, that of mediator between (the angel of) God and the *ekklesia*, who received life-giving words for the *ekklesia*.

Given what we have seen above, namely that by the term *holy* in the Creed we utter a commitment rather than a statement of fact, it is tempting to interpret the Greek term *ekklesia* along the lines of its etymology as *convocatio* rather than as *congregatio*.²¹ If we do so, when confessing the Creed we use the term *ekklesia* to refer to the *process* of gathering people rather than to the *outcome* of that process.²² The Church is not a 'closed-off group of individuals,' but 'fundamentally open, as God's constant invitation to everyone to be reborn in the divine life.'²³ This is an interpretation that was not unknown to the early church. Thus, Isidore of Seville († 636) explains: 'It is properly called *ekklesia* because it must call all to itself and gather them together.'²⁴ Though Isidore here aptly articulates the convoking character of the Church, his statement may easily be misunderstood in another respect. The Church calls people to Christ rather than to itself. The opening phrase of the dogmatic constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, begins by saying not that the Church is the light of nations but that *Christ* is the light of nations. It is the task of the Church to reflect this light and to make the salvation Jesus Christ acquired effectively present in history.²⁵

The image of the Church as a *convocation* is also suitable in another respect: convocations do not send themselves. It is the Holy Spirit who, by the Church, calls humans into communion with Christ. If we interpret the Creed in this light, by confessing the Church, we commit to opening

²¹ For this distinction, see Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1950), 24.

²² *Process* and *outcome* are the terms used by Sjoerd Mulder, *The Turn to the Church in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: A Promising Ecclesiology* (London: Routledge, 2022), 187.

²³ Mulder, *Turn to the Church*, 187, referring to De Lubac.

²⁴ 'Ecclesia autem uocatur proprie, propter quod omnes ad se uocet et in unum congreget.' Isidore of Seville, *De ecclesiasticis officiis* I.1 c.1 (PL 83 739–740; CCL CXIII 4 15–16).

²⁵ Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 67.

ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that we may gather people together for the Kingdom. We announce that we are ready to contribute to the growth of the Church, rather than that we express trust in an institution.

4. Confessing the *Catholic* Church

What does the word ‘catholic’ mean in this connection? The Greek *katholikos* is mostly translated as ‘general.’ It is a conjunction of *kata* (from, indicating a movement from a higher to a lower place) and *to holon* (the whole). By ‘catholic,’ then, we indicate a whole that has an organic coherence, i.e. a coherence like that of an animal, the parts of which form the whole only in a specific configuration. For a whole that is constituted by any configuration, like, e.g., the grains of sand on the ground forming a heap of sand, the Greek has a different term: *pas*.²⁶ We can best explain the term ‘catholic’ by pointing out that it indicates extension and coherence in one term. The catholic church is a worldwide church, not a local church or parish. That is the extension. But this universal church is not merely the sum of all local churches. When we call the church ‘catholic,’ we always intend what makes the church cohere as well. People disagree on what in the last resort constitutes this ecclesial coherence. The keeping of God’s commandments, the living from God’s sacraments, the focus on the one truth, the community between the local churches, the organizational structure of the church around a bishop or around the Bishop of Rome have all been mentioned in this connection.

If we may see the descent of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost as the origin of the Christian church, the church has been catholic in the sense just explained from the very moment of its beginning. On the one hand, all those present at the first Pentecost – people from all inhabited parts of the world that were known at the time – hear the apostles speak in their own languages (Acts 2:6).²⁷ Thus, before any missionary activity of the apostles had taken place, the agenda for the church was set: it aims to embrace the whole of humanity. Moreover, this is not a merely human endeavor but an aim set for the church by God. On the other hand, the aim is not just to spread all over the world. A clear focus is given as well: ‘we hear them telling in our own tongues *the mighty works*

²⁶ Knut Wenzel, ‘Katholisch,’ in: LThK³ Vol. 5 (Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 1345–1346.

²⁷ See Gary Gilbert, ‘The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/3 (Autumn 2002), 497–529.

of God' (Acts 2:11 ESV). The focus of the church is on proclaiming the wonderful things God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Here also, we have both extension and coherence. That is what 'catholicity' means, from the very beginning of the church on.²⁸

If we want to know more precisely what the term 'catholic' in the Creed means, we should inquire what is denied or rejected when we confess the catholicity of the church.²⁹ We can get some idea of this by looking at the church fathers.

- (1) It is denied that a local church that has lost communion with the universal church can be catholic. Already in the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem claimed that the church 'is called Catholic [...] because it extends all over the world, from one end of the earth to the other.'³⁰ Every form of schism is rejected. The same is claimed by Augustine when he states that the church is catholic because it embraces all peoples.³¹
- (2) It is also denied that it is possible to be catholic outside the organizational structures of the church. Already Ignatius of Antioch applies this criterion when he states: 'Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.'³² Similar statements can be found in many of the church fathers, for example in Augustine, who claims that one of the things that keep him within the catholic church is the succession of priests, beginning with Peter and continuing up to the present bishop.³³
- (3) And finally the idea is rejected that it is possible to remain catholic without holding to the orthodox faith and the truly Christian life.

²⁸ Koch, *Kirche Gottes*, 20; cf. CCC 830–831. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (London: SCM, 2006), 52, also discusses the catholicity of the church starting from Acts 2. The term *katholikos* is not found in the New Testament; in Acts 4:18, we find *katholou*, but not in application to the church.

²⁹ On the following, see J. Robert Wright, "'Catholicity" in the Early Church and in the Developing Roman Empire,' in: Marsha L. Dutton & Emily K. Stucky (eds.), *Globalization and Catholicity: Ecumenical Conversations on God's Abundance and the People's Need*, Beiheft zu IKZ 100 (2010), 75–89; Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 13–29; Lawrence Cunningham, *An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), 1–22.

³⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XVIII 23.

³¹ Augustine, *Epistola* XCIII 23.

³² Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* VIII; translation taken from: John R. Willis, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), 53–54.

³³ Augustine, *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti* IV 5 (PL 42 175).

The church is catholic by adhering to the whole truth.³⁴ The most famous formulation of this principle comes from Vincent of Lérins, who in the first half of the fifth century suggested that the catholic church ‘hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense Catholic.’³⁵

Thus, it is quite obvious that in the Apostles’ Creed, ‘catholic’ signifies a characteristic of the Church. Arguably, it refers to a characteristic the Church *should have* rather than a characteristic the Church in fact has. In technical terms taken from analytical philosophy: the term ‘catholic’ denotes a prescriptive property rather than a descriptive property. Vincent Brümmer explains this distinction as follows: ‘Whereas the *constative properties* of something determine what we *can* or *cannot* do with regard to it, its *prescriptive properties* determine what we *ought* or *ought not to do* with regard to it, or, more generally, what *attitude* we should have toward it.’³⁶ Applied to the catholicity of the Church: when we confess the catholicity of the Church, this does not mean that it, in fact, adheres to the whole truth, but that we, as believers within the Church, commit ourselves to making this the case by using the ‘instinct for the truth of the Gospel’ given to us by the Holy Spirit (our *sensus fidei*).³⁷ Nor does it mean that the Church, in fact, embraces all people, but that we commit ourselves to making this the case by spreading the Gospel. The catholicity of the Church, then, is closely connected to what we said above about the Church as *convocatio*: it refers to God’s invitation to everyone. When Pope Francis emphasizes that the Catholic Church welcomes everyone – *todos, todos, todos* – as he did during the 2023 World Youth Day welcome ceremony in Lisbon, he in fact repeats the Apostles’ Creed and *Lumen Gentium* 13: ‘All people³⁸ are called to belong to the new people of God. Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God’s will may be fulfilled.’ Thus, the catholicity of the Church is also an expression of the *universality* of the salvific will of

³⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XVIII 23; Augustine, *Epistola* XCIII 23.

³⁵ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* II 6.

³⁶ For this distinction, see Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry*, 121 (italics his).

³⁷ International Theological Commission, *SENSUS FIDEI in the Life of the Church* (2014).

³⁸ Here, I have replaced ‘men’ by ‘people.’

God.³⁹ To quote Pope Francis once more: 'In the Church, there is room for everyone. Everyone. In the Church, no one is left out or left over.'⁴⁰ *That* is the primary meaning of the catholicity of the Church.

EXCURSUS:
'CATHOLIC' AS PROPER NAME

In a later, but still early, development, the term 'catholic' loses its original meaning and begins to function as a proper name. In the above-mentioned Letter XCIII, Augustine mentions a 'Complaint against the Catholic Church' made by the Donatists to the Emperor (13).⁴¹ Here, the Donatists use 'Catholic' as a proper name, and so does Augustine himself in the way in which he contrasts the Catholic Church with that of the Donatists (e.g., 16). Earlier on (ca. 347), Cyril of Jerusalem already used 'Catholic' as a proper name when he suggested that when traveling, one should not ask for church because sects also call themselves 'church.' Instead, one should ask for the Catholic Church here because 'Catholic' is the name of the true church.⁴² In 380, when Emperor Theodosius established Christianity as the state religion, in the Edict of Thessalonica, he authorized those who confessed their faith in the Triune God in communion with the Roman Pontiff Damasus and with bishop Peter of Alexandria to assume the name of 'Catholic Christians' (*christianorum catholicorum nomen*).⁴³ But the most famous statement in which 'Catholic' functions as a proper name is that of Pacianus of Barcelona: 'Christian is my name, Catholic my surname'⁴⁴ (around 370).

³⁹ Peter De Mey, 'Towards a Healthy Future of Catholicity in the Roman Catholic Church: Recommendations by Pope Francis,' in: Dagmar Heller & Péter Szentpétery (eds.), *Catholicity under Pressure: The Ambiguous Relationship between Diversity and Unity* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 253.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, 'Address at Welcome Ceremony,' Lisbon 3 August 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230803-portogallo-cerimonia-accoglienza.html>.

⁴¹ Cf. Augustinus, *Contra epistolam Manichaei* IV 5.

⁴² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* XVIII 26.

⁴³ English translation in: Sidney Z. Ehler & John B. Morrall (eds.), *Church and State Through the Centuries: A Collection of Historic Documents and Commentaries* (London: Burns & Oates, 1954), 7. Though in this document 'catholic' functions as a name, two of the three above-mentioned criteria (organisation and orthodoxy) are explicitly applied here.

⁴⁴ 'Christianus mihi nomen est, Catholicus vero cognomen.' *Epistola* I 4 (PL 13, 1055).

Theologians are familiar with the phenomenon of a descriptive term that functions as a proper name, since something similar is the case with the word 'God.' Nelson Pike has shown in a very helpful analysis of the concept of God 'that "God" is a special kind of descriptive expression, viz., [...] a "title-phrase." Grammatically, title phrases are descriptive expressions that often do the work of proper names and that often appear in linguistic environments similar to those associated with proper names.'⁴⁵

From the perspective of conceptual clarity, it is not desirable that the same term is used both as a proper name and as a descriptive term. But in the case of the term 'God,' Pike claims, it is inevitable. Sometimes, we use this term as a proper name, like when we say, 'God spoke to Moses,' while at other times, we use it as a descriptive term, like when we say that YHWH is God. The actual use of this term in our culture through the centuries accounts for the fact that both uses of the term 'God' are closely tied together so that, in practice, it has become impossible to separate them radically from each other.⁴⁶ The same applies to the term 'catholic': it is – just like the term 'God' – a descriptive term, but at least from the fourth century to the present day, this descriptive term also functioned as a proper name. The ambiguity this term acquired early on can also be seen in the oldest Latin translations of the Apostles' Creed, in which the Greek *katholikos* was transcribed rather than translated. A further indication is that in various early commentaries on the Apostles' Creed the term 'Catholic' is left unexplained; this means that it was taken to be a proper name.⁴⁷ Finally, this is one of the reasons why Protestant translations of the Creed tend to avoid the term 'catholic.'⁴⁸

Though the ambiguity of 'catholic' – both adjective and proper name – can now no longer be made undone, it is important that in our interpretation of the Creed we interpret it as an adjective, and not as a proper name.

⁴⁵ Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 29; cf. Pike, 'Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin,' esp. 67–68.

⁴⁶ Pike, *God and Timelessness*, 32–33.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Niceta of Remesiana, *De symbolo* 10, edited by A.E. Burn in: *Niceta of Remesiana: His Life and Works* (Cambridge: CUP, 1905), 38–54, esp. 48–49; Burn dates this treatise to c. 375 (lxx).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., the translation of the Apostles Creed by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church' (<http://www.wels.net/what-we-believe/statements-beliefs/apostles-creed>, visited 5 March 2013). Luther rendered 'Catholic' with 'christlich' (Christian) and the Heidelberg Catechism with 'allgemein, christlich' (general, Christian).

EXCURSUS:
CATHOLICITY AND MIGRATION

The catholicity of the Church also has implications for the way we think about migration. The fact that the Church is Catholic also means, at the very least, that the Church has no borders, and that Catholics belong first and foremost to a global family and not to a national community. This means that we, as Catholics, cannot support attempts to protect the most prosperous countries against migration, including the attempt to change Europe into a well-guarded fort. The Catholic Church has drawn this conclusion in its social teaching. Already in 1952, Pope Pius condemned the ‘exaggerated nationalism’ that aims to ‘arbitrarily restrict the natural rights of people to migrate. He explicitly included what we would nowadays call economic refugees, urging political leaders ‘to allow those in need, whose own lands lack the necessities of life, to emigrate to other countries.’⁴⁹ Ironically, at the time the Pope was especially referring to Italian emigrants. Nowadays, Pope Francis demands similar rights with reference to immigrants who want to *enter* Italy.

5. Confessing the Communion of Saints

The Greek text reads *hagioon koinoonian*, the Latin *communio sanctorum*. Both Greek and Latin can be translated in two ways. When we read *hagioon* or *sanctorum* as the genitive of *hagia* or *sancta* it means the community of the sacred (literally ‘the holy things,’ i.e., the sacraments), and when we read it as the genitive of *hagioi* or *sancti* it means the communion of saints (in the sense of holy *persons*). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and contemporary liturgical translations read the text as dealing with the communion of saints, but in the early church it was also interpreted as dealing with the sacred, and syntactic considerations indicate that it is not unlikely that this is what was originally intended.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Exsul familia Nazarethana: On the Spiritual Care for Emigrants* (Rome, 1 August 1952).

⁵⁰ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* trans. by N.E. Nagel (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 204–206 shows that in the time the Apostles’ Creed was written, *communio* is regularly used with the genitive of things, indicating ‘that several persons together have,

If this phrase refers to the communion of *saints*, that should not be interpreted as the *community* of saints. The Creed is a very short summary of the Christian faith and is almost devoid of digressions and duplications.⁵¹ 'Community of saints,' however, is almost equivalent to 'holy Catholic Church,' especially when one takes into account that in early Christianity all Christians were called 'saints.'⁵² *Communio sanctorum* then became equivalent to *congregatio fidelium* and thus to the Church.⁵³ Moreover, the meaning of 'community' seems to be at odds with the Greek *koinonia*.⁵⁴ No, in that case, 'communion of saints' should be taken to refer rather to the *fellowship among Christians*, referring to its special quality like Acts 2:44: 'And all who shared the faith owned everything in common.' Then, however, it is strange that the Creed does not specify the quality to which it refers. 'Having everything in common' was characteristic only of the earliest beginnings of the Christian community, and it seems quite unlikely that this is meant here.

I prefer, therefore, the alternative interpretation, according to which *communio sanctorum* refers to the *communio sacramentorum* (partaking of the sacraments). In that case, this phrase refers to the eucharistic communion with the Risen One, established through baptism.⁵⁵ If we read the text in this way, the connection with the two following phrases becomes quite close. The thought of baptism immediately evokes that of the forgiveness of sins: in the early church, the forgiveness of sins was not obtained through confession but through baptism. The resurrection

possess, gain, or experience these things as well as the bond thereby made between them' (204). 'Communio with a genitive of persons (*sanctorum* from *sancti*) does occur, but rather infrequently' (205). See also F.J. Badcock, 'Sanctorum Communio as an Article in the Creed,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 21/82 (Jan. 1920), 106–126; Javier G. Sanchez, 'The "Sanctorum Communio" in Henri de Lubac: The Reception of the Clause "Credo ... Sanctorum Communionem from the Apostles' Creed by Henri de Lubac' (STL thesis Regis College/University of Toronto 2008), 34–36.

⁵¹ Thus David Scaer, 'He Did Descend to Hell: In Defense of the Apostles' Creed,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/1 (1992), 94.

⁵² See above, 17.

⁵³ Thus Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 143.

⁵⁴ Sanchez, 'The "Sanctorum Communio" in Henri de Lubac,' 36; Montanari, *Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, 1149–1150. Contra Barth, *Credo*, 137.

⁵⁵ For the classic historical argument showing that the original meaning of *communio sanctorum* was *communio sacramentorum*, see Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 209–218. He is followed by CCC 960; Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* trans. by J.R. Foster (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 257–258; Koch, *Kirche Gottes*, 92.

of the body also perfectly fits into this context, as the following quotation from Paul shows:

You cannot have forgotten that all of us, when we were baptised into Christ Jesus, were baptised into his death. So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glorious power, we too should begin living a new life. If we have been joined to him by dying a death like his, so we shall be by a resurrection like his; realising that our former self was crucified with him, so that the self which belonged to sin should be destroyed and we should be freed from the slavery of sin. [...] For by dying, he is dead to sin once and for all, and now the life that he lives is life with God. In the same way, you must see yourselves as being dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. That is why you must not allow sin to reign over your mortal bodies (Rom. 6:3–6, 10–12a).

In baptism, we are buried with Christ and rise again with him, dead to sin. Baptism is the sacrament that mediates our resurrection. This results in an explanation that makes the coherence of the various phrases optimally clear. The third article of the Creed ('The Holy Spirit: the holy Catholic Church, partaking of the sacraments, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting') characterizes the church as a eucharistic community, into which one enters through baptism, a community that is sanctified by the Spirit when it participates in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This reading is also supported by the fact that in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, the phrase *unus baptisma* ('one baptism') takes the place of the phrase *communio sanctorum* in the Apostles' Creed.⁵⁶

An interpretation that is in line with the interpretation just given but casts the net a little wider still in its interpretation of *sancta* (holy things), includes the Bible among the *sancta*.⁵⁷ On this interpretation, partaking in the *sancta* also means reading the Bible. Sacrament and Scripture belong together.⁵⁸ Together, Word and sacrament lead to the forgiveness of sins and thus also to the resurrection. This broader interpretation is meaningful and, in light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, even required, though it cannot be traced back to early authorities.

⁵⁶ Sanchez, 'The "Sanctorum Communio" in Henri de Lubac,' 39; Stephen Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1964), 63.

⁵⁷ Thus Karl Barth, *Credo*, 193. This interpretation is typically Reformed, but that does not detract from the fact that it uncovers an element of Christian truth that has often gone unnoticed.

⁵⁸ SC 24, 35, 52, and esp. 56; DV 21.

Word and sacrament do not only lead to forgiveness, however: through Baptism and Scripture the Holy Spirit constitutes the eucharistic fellowship that is the Church. This fellowship does not only include those who now live on earth, but also those who are now in heaven (CCC 954). Thus, the Church also has a cosmic dimension. The fact that this fellowship will be growing until the coming of Christ, moreover, constitutes an eschatological dimension of the *communio sanctorum*.

When we confess the *communio sanctorum* (of the holy things), we confess that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can read the Bible, understand it, partake of the sacraments, and profit from them. We do not merely confess this as a theoretical possibility, but we commit ourselves to availing ourselves of this possibility. We will indeed read the Bible and partake of the sacraments, and thereby become a *communio sanctorum* (of the holy people). Being baptized and eating the bread and drinking the wine incorporates us – again through the power of the Spirit – into Christ, whom we represent in the world. By this incorporation into Christ, we enter into a fellowship with all who believe in Christ, not only those on earth but also those in heaven and those who have left the earth but need further purification before entering heaven.⁵⁹

6. Confessing the Forgiveness of Sins

Above we have seen that everything mentioned in the last articles of the Creed must be seen as a concrete effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit. This also applies to the forgiveness of sins. Nowhere do we find this more clearly reflected in the sources of Christianity than in what the Gospel of John (20:19–23) tells us about an appearance of the risen Lord:

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, ‘Peace be with you,’ and, after saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord, and he said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.’ After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.

⁵⁹ CCC 954; the state of purification is traditionally called purgatory.

The gift of the Spirit and the ability to forgive sins are communicated in two immediately consecutive sentences; it is *by virtue of* the gift of the Spirit that the disciples can, in the name of God, forgive sins. In the words of H.R. Mackintosh: the 'Church ... is the fellowship ... through which, in the power of the Spirit, the assurance of God's forgiving love is conveyed to the world.'⁶⁰

This Bible text has played a major role in the history of the forgiveness of sins. Above, we have seen how, in the early church, baptism was the exclusive sacrament of forgiveness of sins. However, this soon led to abuses: believers started to postpone their baptism until their deathbed in order to be able to go to heaven free of sins. Those who had become Christians and had been baptized were, in practice, unable to stop sinning and were therefore also in need of forgiveness of sins. Then the Church, in a new understanding of Jesus' word 'If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven' (John 20:23), introduced the sacrament of confession. It is obvious that Catholic believers in our time, when considering the forgiveness of sins, think not only of baptism but also of confession.

Belief in the forgiveness of sins, however, is not exhausted by the belief that when we ask for forgiveness, God will forgive our sins. The Lord's Prayer, as it is rendered in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, has the following phrase: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'⁶¹ When Christians believe in forgiveness, they do not merely believe that God forgives them, but they also believe that they should forgive each other. When Peter asked Jesus: 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?', Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'⁶² Christians must forgive without limits. Moreover, the Lord's Prayer suggests that there is a connection between our forgiveness and God's forgiveness. Such a connection is also suggested in other texts in the New Testament. Immediately after the text that we have just quoted, Matthew has Jesus telling the parable of the unforgiving servant. In this parable, a king forgives a servant who owes him the incredible sum of ten thousand talents, while this servant himself outrageously refuses forgiveness to

⁶⁰ H.R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1941), 273.

⁶¹ CCC 2759. This the text as given in Matt. 6:9–13. A shorter version can be found in Luke 11:2–4.

⁶² Matt. 18:21–22. The Greek terms translated here as 'seventy-seven' can also be translated as 'seventy times seven.' What's clear, however, is that Christians should be prepared to forgive abundantly.

a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii – a comparative trifle. When the king hears this, he hands him over to the torturers until he has paid his debt. And Jesus ends by saying: ‘And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart’ (Matt. 18:35).

What precisely is the connection between God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness? The clause on forgiveness in the Lord’s prayer is often read as posing a condition for God’s forgiveness: ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we *have forgiven* those who trespass against us.’ This reading, which is based on the manuscript evidence – the better Greek manuscripts have an aorist past tense – suggests that ‘human forgiving is a condition for divine forgiving.’⁶³ This interpretation is corroborated by what Jesus says next in Matthew’s Gospel: ‘Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either’ (Matt. 6:14–15). The parable of the unforgiving servant suggests that God’s forgiveness comes first, however. Our forgiveness is the natural reaction to God’s prior forgiveness, and if this natural reaction fails to obtain, God will retract God’s forgiveness. In other words, ‘while God takes the initiative in forgiveness, the full and lasting experience of God’s forgiveness is conditional on human forgiveness.’⁶⁴

We can now return to forgiveness *as a work of the Spirit*. On the day of Pentecost, Peter said to the people of Jerusalem: ‘Every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ Not only is it the Holy Spirit who enables the disciples to forgive, but those who are baptized and thereby forgiven will also receive the Holy Spirit themselves. And it is this gift of the Spirit that enables them to become the forgiving persons that Jesus requires them to become. When we confess the forgiveness of sins, then, we do not only confess that God is willing to forgive our sins but also that we ourselves, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are willing to forgive the sins of those who sin against us.

⁶³ Todd Pokrifka-Joe, ‘Probing the Relationship between Divine and Human Forgiveness in Matthew: Hearing a Neglected Voice in the Canon,’ in: Alistair McFadyen & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *Forgiveness and Truth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 166–167, quot. 167. Cf. CCC 2838: ‘according to the second phrase [‘as we forgive those who trespass against us’ – MS], our petition will not be heard unless we have first met a strict requirement.’

⁶⁴ Pokrifka-Joe, ‘Probing the Relationship between Divine and Human Forgiveness,’ 171.

7. Confessing the Resurrection of the Body

Strictly speaking, both the Greek and the Latin texts of the Apostles' Creed mention the resurrection of the flesh (Greek *sarx*,⁶⁵ Latin *caro*), not that of the body. This expression, 'resurrection of the flesh,' is not found in Scripture. Moreover, it did not go down well in Hellenistic culture. This is probably the reason why it is replaced in later confessions, like the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, by 'resurrection of the dead.' The meaning of both expressions is the same: our dead will rise again, and this resurrection is a *bodily* resurrection.

Above we have seen how several of the clauses of the Creed point forward to the confession of the resurrection of the body. Firstly, God the Father loved Jesus beyond death and raised him from the dead. By calling Jesus' Father 'the Father almighty' and accepting him as also being our Father, as Jesus told us to, we accept our position as sisters and brothers of Jesus. Though there is, of course, still a difference between the position of Jesus and that of us – we are children of God *by adoption* – this inspires the hope that God will do the same for us. This hope is strongly supported by what Paul writes in Romans 8. On the one hand, he writes that whoever is led by the Spirit is a child of God (v. 14). And on the other hand, he says, 'if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead has made his home in you [and so you are children of God, see v. 14 – MS], then he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you' (Rom. 8:11). Thus, our confession of God as Father prepares for our confession of the resurrection of the body and eternal life as brought about by the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the confession of Jesus' resurrection *on the third day* also points forward to the bodily resurrection. That Jesus had risen on the third day was known either by the disappearance of his *body* from the grave or the appearances of Jesus in his resurrection *body* beginning on the third day (or by both, of course). Since the hope for the resurrection of individual Christians at the end of time (1 Thess. 4:16) is based on Jesus' resurrection (cf. 2 Cor. 4:14, 1 Thess. 4:14, Rev. 1:18), we have reason to suppose that this general resurrection⁶⁶ resembles Jesus' resurrection,

⁶⁵ 'The Gk. word *sarx* may simply mean the body (2 Cor. 12.7, Gal. 4.13f.), and in 1 Cor. 15.39 clearly expresses the essence of a creature's nature.' Kenneth Grayston, 'Flesh, Fleshly, Carnal,' in: Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 83.

⁶⁶ The term 'general' here indicates that *all* people will rise, and not only Christians. Any difference between individual people will be made at the last judgment, not at the resurrection.

and that it also is a bodily resurrection. Though the Creed confirms this, we must realize that there are also important differences between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection we hope for. In Jesus' case, his tomb was empty; in the resurrection, his earthly body was transformed. When one looks at the history of humanity, it is impossible that it shall be the same with us, if only because the organic material that makes up our bodies is incorporated into the cycle of all life.⁶⁷ And that also means that material from the bodies of the deceased is reused in this cycle and ends up in the bodies of the living, including people. If Christians had wanted to prevent this, they would have had to embalm and cherish the bodies of their deceased as the ancient Egyptians did. Christians have never done this. And rightly so, because if resurrection and eternal life depended on the presence of a complete corpse, this would give more power to the enemies of Christians than to the good and just God – and that cannot be true. That is why it is right that Christians have given up their opposition to cremation. Being buried instead of being cremated may function as a sign of one's belief in the resurrection, but it cannot be a condition for that resurrection.⁶⁸ The differences between Jesus' resurrection and ours do not only concern the body that is sown but also the body that is reaped: the resurrection body. In Jesus' case, his resurrection body appears in our world; in our case, it shall appear in the new world. Jesus' resurrection, then, is unique, and while our future resurrection is similar to it, it is not the same.

Above, we have seen that with respect to Jesus' resurrection the gospels emphasize both the continuity and the discontinuity between his earthly body and his resurrection body. Paul emphasizes the same with respect to the general resurrection. He emphasizes continuity when he compares the dying body to a seed (1 Cor. 15:36–38), the resurrection to its germination. At the same time, he also emphasizes the discontinuity, because a seed is not the same as a fully grown plant. These two are both important: continuity (the risen person is the same as the deceased) and discontinuity (the resurrection body relates to the earthly body as a plant relates to seed: it is somehow the continuation of it, and yet it is completely different).

That the resurrection body cannot be exactly the same as the body of the person who died immediately before his or her death is also evident

⁶⁷ Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 91–92, 94–102.

⁶⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Instruction regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (Rome, 15 August 2016), 3–4.

from the fact that if that were the case, the resurrected person would instantly die again from the same cause of death from which s/he had died before. Further speculation about the nature of the resurrection body, the age of the resurrection body, and the question to what extent scars and/or disabilities will be part of it, is foreign to the Creed; therefore, we need not engage in it here.

It is important that we realize that in the Apostles' Creed, we confess the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul. Resurrection requires previous death, while immortality is the denial of death. If the soul is immortal, it does not die. We can see what this means in Socrates, whose death was described by Plato († 348 BCE) in the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, Phaedo, who was with Socrates on the day of his death, tells Echecrates what he remembers about it. Before Socrates put the poison cup to his mouth, he explained to his friends why he had no fear of death. Our body is like a dungeon that hinders the functioning of the mind. The separation of body and soul that takes place at death is a liberation from this body, after which the soul can enter the eternal realm of ideas. There, the soul will enjoy eternal bliss and be freed forever from the errors and follies of men, their fears and wild passions, and all their other weaknesses. Socrates, therefore, approaches death calmly and fearlessly. With his last words, he orders Crito to sacrifice a cock for Asclepius. By this he suggests that the loss of the body through death can be equated with the recovery from an illness, for that was the occasion on which the Greeks sacrificed a cock to Asclepius.

Christians do not see death as liberation. We can see this from the example of Jesus. Like Socrates,⁶⁹ Jesus knew in advance that He must die (Luke 18:31–33), but unlike Socrates, He was burdened by this knowledge (Luke 12:50). Like Socrates, Jesus had his disciples around him on the day of his death. However, He does not calmly teach them about immortality, but trembles with fear and begs them not to leave him alone (Mk. 14:33–42). Unlike Socrates, Jesus does not see death as a friend: He asks his Father: 'Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it' (Mark 14:36). In the Bible, death is seen as an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26) that separates man from God; face to face with his death, Jesus feels abandoned by his Father (Mark 15:34). The calmness that characterizes Socrates on the threshold of death is in sharp contrast to the strong cries and tears (Heb. 5:7) of Jesus. Faced with Jesus' fear of

⁶⁹ On the contrast between Jesus and Socrates, see Oscar Cullmann, 'Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?', in: Krister Stendahl (ed.), *Immortality and Resurrection* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 9–53.

dying, one wonders how Paul could write, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?' (1 Cor. 15:54–55). In this context, it is important to note that just before this triumphant exclamation Paul said that death is the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26) and that it is clear from the context of the quoted exclamation that the victory over death that Paul refers to shall take place in the eschaton and has not yet occurred.

Thus, Jesus' example does not encourage us to abandon our fear of death. Death is surrounded by a smell of decay. Death means destruction and separation from God; unfortunately, there is no resurrection without death. This doesn't mean we should fool ourselves by portraying death as less black than it is. As Cullmann notes, Jesus' death is indeed as gruesome as the late medieval painter Matthias Grünewald depicts it on the Isenheim altarpiece. But that is precisely why the same painter also knew how to paint the resurrection of Christ! 'Whoever paints a pretty death can paint no resurrection. Whoever has not grasped the horror of death cannot join Paul in the hymn of victory.'⁷⁰ Only the realization of the abysmal nature of death makes humans look forward to the resurrection.

If we thus contrast the resurrection of the dead with the immortality of the soul, this enables us to understand better what exactly is said in this article of faith:

- 1) Death is an enemy. Christians do not make light of death. However, we do know that Jesus has preceded us also in this, and that by going through death he conquered it and gained not only his, but also our resurrection.
- 2) Thus, the resurrection we are looking forward to is not our natural destiny but pure grace, obtained for us by Jesus and granted to us by God.
- 3) We do not know what we will be after the resurrection, but we do know that we will be embodied persons.

EXCURSUS: RESURRECTION AND IMMORTALITY

Christian belief in the resurrection of the body obviously differs from Socratic and Platonic belief in the resurrection of the soul. The one is about the body, the other is about the soul. Moreover, the ancient

⁷⁰ Cullmann, 'Immortality of the Soul,' 19–20.

philosophical belief in the immortality of the soul is such that it makes belief in the resurrection superfluous. For Socrates and Plato, the death of the body means the liberation of the soul. On their view, the resurrection of the body would make this liberation undone, and that would be most unwelcome. The ancient philosophical belief in immortality and Christian belief in the resurrection are not merely different; they mutually exclude each other.

Though both the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed mention only the resurrection, the Catholic faith includes belief in a form of immortality, even though that form is different from Plato's. The resurrection of the body will take place at the end of time. According to the New Testament, the souls of those who die before then will enter some kind of *intermediate state*, awaiting their reunion with the resurrection body. The details of this intermediate condition are not specified by the New Testament authors; sometimes the metaphors of 'rest' (Rev. 6:9–11; 14:13) and 'sleep' (1 Cor. 15:18; 1 Thess. 4:13–16) are used.⁷¹ Those who die in Christ will also in this intermediate state remain united with him (Phil. 1:23; Luke 23:43).

Thus, Christian belief in life after death concerns two phases: a first phase of 'rest' or 'sleep' of the conscious soul, and a second phase in which the soul is reunited with the resurrection body. The first phase provides the continuity that warrants that the dying person and the rising person are the same (and the rising person is not some kind of 'copy' of the person who died).⁷² The second phase is the ultimate phase, in which we will once more be fully human, though without the bodily vulnerability that characterizes our earthly life.

8. Confessing Eternal Life

After the confession of the resurrection of the body, the understanding of 'eternal life' may seem obvious: after the resurrection, those who go to heaven – to a life with God – will live forever. Their life will not come to an end. This is the way Jesus speaks about eternal life in John 3:16: 'For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone

⁷¹ The New Testament's intermediate state is the natural successor to the Old Testament's *sheol*, the most important difference being that in the intermediate state, contrary to in *sheol*, communion with God remains possible.

⁷² International Theological Commission, *Some Current Questions in Eschatology* (1992), 4.3.

who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is the source of life.⁷³ This is confirmed by the New Testament (John 6:63), which, moreover, associates the gift of the Spirit with being reborn and receiving eternal life.⁷⁴

This eternal life may be conceived in either of two ways, depending on how one conceives the eternity of God. Most theologians in the Catholic tradition argue that God's existence is 'outside of' time. Note the quotation marks: here a spatial metaphor (outside) indicates a temporal reality. The idea is that time is a characteristic of creation, not of God, and that time was created by God when God created heaven and earth. To the eternal God, all moments of time are simultaneously 'present,' which explains God's foreknowledge: God 'views' the future as present in his eternal now. Most theologians in the Protestant tradition – and a minority of Catholics – argue that God exists, like God's creation, in time. The difference is that God's existence is without beginning and end and that God has a perfect memory so that the past does not appear in a grey mist for God. Eternity then becomes sempiternity. Those who hold that God exists outside of time may hold that entering heaven means entering a timeless existence with God. Others will argue that also in heaven, human beings shall exist in time, but this time shall not end. We need not decide here which of the two is the case; in both cases, the resurrected person will live without end.

This quantitative understanding of 'eternal life' is certainly part of what it means, but it does not exhaust it. It fails to grasp the qualitative aspect of eternal life, however, as Jesus articulates it in John 17:3: 'And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' This knowledge of God, personal rather than propositional, is part of faith. During this life, this knowledge is real but imperfect. Once we have risen with Christ, we will know fully: 'Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known' (1 Cor. 13:12). In the quantitative sense, one either has eternal life or does not have it; in this qualitative sense, there are degrees in eternal life. During our earthly lives, the Holy Spirit provides foretastes of eternal life through the words of Scripture (cf. John 6:68) and through the sacraments (John 3:5–6; 6:51–54), which for that reason are sometimes called 'sacraments of eternal life' (CCC 1130).

⁷³ See, e.g., Job 27:3; 32:8; 33:4; Psalm 33:6; 104:30.

⁷⁴ John 3:5–8; Gal. 6:8; cf. CCC 2652.

By confessing eternal life, then, one expresses one's relationship to the living Christ and one's hope and steadfast expectation that the real but limited knowledge of Christ which one can draw from this relationship, will after the resurrection, when 'we shall be seeing face to face,' become full and certain knowledge. The final clauses of the Creed, then, those concerning the resurrection of the body and the eternal life, express hope.

Amen

While the Creed does not begin as most prayers do, it does end so. Already in Old Testament times, ‘amen’ was a confirmative end of – or, if someone else says it, response to – a prayer.¹ Though ‘amen’ is sometimes used in other ways – Jesus used it to introduce some of his sayings – the fact that it occurs at the end of the Creed, confirms our interpretation of it as a prayer. Since ‘amen’ functions here as a confirmative end to the prayer the Creed is, it seems appropriate to summarize our interpretation of the Creed here and thus also to gain more insight into the exact meaning of ‘amen’ in this case. As we have claimed above, words derive their meaning from the company they keep.

It seems fitting to give this summary in two steps. At the beginning of this book, we have put forward the hypothesis that the Creed as a whole should be understood as a commitment rather as the statement of a series of items that should be held to be true. Our hypothesis did not include that every sentence in the Creed was commissive; the clauses of the Creed are varied in nature. Nevertheless, we assumed that the commitment character of the Creed was dominant over the other voices that are also there. We will now first summarize our findings on the extent to which commitments are present in the Creed. After that, we will inquire whether these commitments, understood in the context of the whole of the Creed, warrant the conclusion that the Creed as a whole should be understood as a commitment.

1. Commitment in the Creed

In this book, we have attempted an interpretation of the Apostles’ Creed as a vow. We assumed that since even the devil shares the factual beliefs confessed in the Creed, these cannot form the essence of the Creed. It is because by confessing the Creed, one commits oneself to live one’s life in worship of God that confessing the Creed gives access to baptism and

¹ Psalm 41:13, 72:19, 89:52, 106:48, 1 Chr. 16:36, Neh. 5:36, 8:6.

eucharist. Here, we will not give a general summary of our comments on every article of the Creed, but rather a focused summary of what we have found about the commissive nature of the Creed.

Assuming that the Apostles' Creed is a vow does not mean interpreting each clause of the Creed as a vow. Such an interpretation would be far-fetched. However, the Creed begins and ends commissively. It begins with an expression of belief in God the Father. This *belief in* is commissive like a wedding vow is commissive: by expressing this belief, the believer commits herself to God. The fact that it is belief in God *the Father* that is confessed, underlines this. Jesus does not instill dogmatic knowledge about the fatherhood of God in his disciples. Instead, He told them to relate to God the Father as his children. This involves many things, but when we read how Jesus related to his Father in the New Testament and how He teaches his disciples to relate to the Father, it is evident that *doing the will of the Father* is an important part of that. So when Christians confess God as Father, they bind themselves to God, to behave towards him as a father, and to do his will. We do his will by the Holy Spirit, and that is what the third and final article of the Apostles' Creed is about. It concretizes our acting with the help of the Spirit in what follows, e.g., the confession of the Church as holy and catholic. These confessions do not primarily state facts, but instead aims that we commit ourselves to actualizing: we commit ourselves to making the Church holy and catholic.

The Creed begins with a confession of faith in God, the omnipotent Father, Creator of heaven and earth. Above, we have claimed that calling God Father implies a commitment to behaving towards him like a father, but in fact, the commitment goes beyond that. This has to do with the fact that Jesus taught us to call God Father and that his way of living in relationship to his Father gave the term 'Father' new dimensions of meaning. It is not easy to spell out these new dimensions; part of this was done only centuries after Jesus in the doctrine of the Trinity. It is clear, however, that when we, as members of the Church, the Body of Christ, confess God as Father, we do not merely commit ourselves to treating God as we would a father, but to emulating this very special relationship Jesus had to his Father. On the one hand, this means that we, as members of the Church, his body, commit ourselves to letting ourselves be drawn into his prayerful love for the Father. On the other hand, it means that we commit ourselves to treating other Christians, including non-Catholics, as our brothers and sisters, with whom we share the same Father. To non-Christians, we owe the respect we owe to fellow creatures of the same Creator and to potential brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the first article, we also confess God as Creator. Creation, we have seen, is a work of love: God loves God's handiwork. It is not merely a work of the beginning (the beginning of the world), but it is a continuous work: God continues to keep his handiwork in existence, and this continuous creation is, again, a work of love. In this work of love, not only the Father but also the Son and the Spirit are involved. We cannot love a person without caring for the things they love. Many people cherish heirlooms that have belonged to their parents or grandparents. They would never have bought the objects in question themselves and may not even consider them beautiful. When evaluated from an economic perspective, they may be without value. The care of their current owners for these heirlooms derives from their family provenance. Similarly, confessing God as Creator implies a commitment: a commitment to care for the creation He lovingly began and continues to support: 'we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes: "by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory," and indeed, "the Lord rejoices in all his works" (Ps 104:31). By virtue of our unique dignity and our gift of intelligence, we are called to respect creation and its inherent laws, for "the Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov. 3:19).'² The commitment to care for God's creation is facilitated by the fact that creation, unlike the heirlooms in the example, is valuable and beautiful in itself.³ Moreover, humanity itself is so dependent on creation that even purely egocentric grounds provide an excellent reason to care for the complex ecosystem that creation is.

When in the second article, we confess Jesus Christ as 'our Lord,' we commit ourselves to handing over the rule of our lives, the Church, and, eventually, the world to Jesus. This sits well with the 'Marian attitude' to which we commit ourselves by confessing Jesus' birth of the virgin Mary: we commit ourselves to open ourselves, like Mary, to the Holy Spirit, in the firm belief that God can also make new beginnings in our lives. If we open ourselves in this way to the Holy Spirit and then confess the suffering and crucifixion Jesus went through out of love for us humans, our reaction will be twofold. We will love him in return and be immensely grateful to him. The gospels make it very clear that this involves a double commitment. In the first place, loving Jesus in return means loving those whom he loves: our neighbors. This love is active: it does not consist in feelings of fondness, but in acting for one's neighbor's good. In the second place, our love for Jesus also involves imitating him and taking up our

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 69.

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 33, 36, 69, etc.

cross while following him. In other words, Christians should accept that following Jesus also means accepting suffering. This suffering can bring us closer to Jesus, and it can even, in some mysterious way, share in the redemptive character of his suffering.

When we confess the ascension of Jesus, this implies our commitment to continuing his work on earth. We do so in the expectation of the last judgment: where we fail, Jesus will set things right – both for the victims of history and for us who believe in him.

‘Spirit’ in the Bible is contrasted not to body or matter, but to lack of life. The Spirit has a proclivity for the material, and especially for the body. The Spirit works through the material world, through people, through us. When we confess belief in the Holy Spirit, then, this means that we open ourselves to the Spirit so that He can work through us and can make us more fully alive. More than that, through us the Spirit can also work in the world, by calling people into communion with Christ and thus convoking the Church, and by letting the Holy Spirit be the soul of the Church, so that it really serves God, both in a moral and in a liturgical sense. The Spirit, moreover, grants us a *sensus fidei* that enables us, when we open ourselves to it, to help the Church to adhere to the whole truth and to embrace everyone. By confessing *communio sanctorum* we commit ourselves to read the Bible and partake of the sacraments, and thereby to become a communion of the saints. Through the sacraments, we receive forgiveness of sins from God. When we confess the forgiveness of sins, however, we also commit ourselves to be forgiving people ourselves and to forgive our neighbor seventy-seven times.

The final two clauses of the Creed, concerning the resurrection of the body and eternal life, express hope rather than commitment.

2. The Creed as Commitment

In the Apostles’ Creed, we may perceive three movements. The *first* movement is that of God towards his creation. This movement begins when God brings the universe into existence and continues when He maintains it in existence. His involvement intensifies when He descends to the earth, becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus, teaches his disciples, suffers, dies, descends to the dead, and rises from the grave. With the ascension, this intensified involvement does not stop but continues through the presence of the Spirit. The Creed describes this first movement in a worshipful way.

The *second* movement is that of creatures towards God. In the surface structure of the Creed, this movement precedes the first movement: the Creed begins with 'I believe.' It is a movement, moreover, that runs all through the Creed: by calling God 'Father,' we commit ourselves to behaving towards him like to a father, and by calling Jesus 'our Lord,' we commit ourselves to letting him be Lord over our lives, the Church and the world. This second movement climaxes in the third article of the Creed, in which we confess the Holy Spirit. By that, we commit ourselves to opening ourselves to the Spirit and letting him work through us, especially to make the Church holy and catholic and to partake of the sacraments.

When we introduced speech act theory and commissives as one type of speech act above, we kept the technical discussion of speech acts and commissives to a minimum. One aspect that we did not mention is that commissives may have factual presuppositions.⁴ One can only meaningfully commit oneself to a course of action if that course of action is possible, and which courses of action are possible depends on the facts. This also applies to the commissives in the Creed. We cannot trust a God who is unreliable; the reliability of God is a condition for our commitment to God. Similarly, what Jesus has done for us enables us to commit ourselves to Jesus. And again, the availability of the Spirit enables us to commit ourselves to the Spirit. The commissives in the Creed are, then, rooted in factual statements about God, especially in God's gracious movement towards the world. These factual statements not only make the commissives possible, but they also make them rational. Rational in the sense of being an adequate response to the facts, in this case, the facts about God. In other words, the first movement we have perceived in the Creed, that of God toward God's creation, functions as a ground for our commitment to God. In the deep structure of the Creed, contrary to the surface structure, God's movement to us precedes our movement to God. By praying the Creed we remind ourselves of God's gracious turn towards us, and it is based on that turn that we dare to commit ourselves, everything we have and are, to God. 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19 NRSV). And it is only because God first loved us, that our commitment to God is rational.

The Creed ends with a *third* and final movement, a movement towards the future as God's gift.⁵ This movement is a movement of hope. This hope is expressed in the believer's confession of the resurrection of the

⁴ Evans, *Logic of Self-Involvement*, 35.

⁵ Cf. David Fergusson & Marcel Sarot (eds.), *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

body and eternal life. This hope, again, needs grounds, needs to be rooted in the facts. It is only based on God's movement towards creation and the believer's commitment to God, that the believer dares to express this hope. The third movement, then, is rooted in the first two movements. It is telling that the clauses expressing hope are followed by 'amen,' a word expressing that the foregoing is reliable or true. Christian hope is not wishful thinking. It is rooted in God's commitment to us and our commitment to God in response. The Creed assents to this hope by 'Amen.' At the end of this book, we would like to make this 'Amen' our own and to end as the Creed ends: Amen!

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