

**I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth**

To believe in God is a matter of faith. Faith has two parts: personal experience, and the teachings and experience passed down through the community of Faith. We believe in God because we have experienced His presence and His work in our hearts. This is commonly known as faith seeking understanding. We also believe, along with the body of believers, in God as He has been made known to us through the ages. The teachings and collective experience of the worldwide Church, passed down from the first apostles, confirmed by the Holy Spirit through the centuries, forms the basis of the Faith in which we worship God.

Even so, God is bigger than our individual and doctrinal beliefs about Him. This is why communication is important as a body of believers. As we each share our experiences, and see how these align with the history of Church experience, we come to a deeper understanding of God. When God moves in a way that our understanding cannot explain, we look to Him, to His Word, and to the Faith for a deeper understanding. Even so, much remains in the realm of Mystery, because God is not bound by our human definitions, timeframes, and limited understandings of Him.

Despite ontological proofs and offerings of evidence to explain the existence of God, we are limited in our ability to explain and prove the existence of an eternal being who is utterly Other than we are. And yet a compelling argument from Anselm's ontological proof is that we can imagine perfection to a degree unmatched by anything on earth or in our imaginations. Therefore it is not inconceivable that One exists above all else. Without acknowledging that God exists, we would also have difficulty explaining the teleological path of creation.

Though understanding of God strains beyond our reason, we also obtain understanding of Him through general and special revelation. We see His handiwork all around us in nature; the

mountains, the seas, and the universe reveal to us who He is. God also reveals Himself to us through His Scriptures – God-breathed, Holy Spirit-inspired – and His Word brings living truth to our hearts as we immerse ourselves in it. God's Word takes primacy above experience, tradition and reason, but also has withstood the centuries of teaching and testing, thus represents the corpus of our tradition as a Church. The Holy Scriptures are the true revelation of God.

God is the creator of all things. He created the heavens and the earth, and charged us to oversee and be good stewards of all His creation. We are responsible for tending to nature, the animals and the environment as good stewards. We are also responsible to recognize that every person is created in the image of God. In our role as God's stewards, there is no place for cruelty, exploitation or abuse of other people. We must show kindness to all of God's creation.

God's creation includes the supernatural realms of angels and demons (fallen angels). The presence of evil in the world, of chaos and decay, does not give us the liberty to treat God's creation badly. Nor does the promise of a new earth exempt us from caring for this one. God is the omnipotent creator, and He created all things to live in goodness and blessing. Our sin caused the decay. God set in motion a plan to redeem. All of creation groans, awaiting that redemption. We are called to live as God's people here and now, not just in the new earth to come.

God is both transcendent and immanent. He stands outside of time. And yet He moves and works within our human realm of experience, through miracles and acts of divine providence. He moves in our hearts and interacts with every detail of our lives. Though His Word refers to God with masculine pronouns, God cannot be contained to a gender. He is Other, so He is neither male nor female in the human understanding of these identities. Yet He possesses characteristics of both genders: He is like a father in creating us, in calling our spirits forth to life. He is like a mother in nurturing us and comforting us.

God is Triune in nature – Three in One. He is a relational being. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are One God – of the same substance, in three Persons. Though our limited human understanding cannot fully grasp the meaning of Three in One, the Definition of Chalcedon, which provides the concept of “same substance” is the closest we have come to verbalizing the nature of the Trinity.

### **And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord**

The second Person of the Trinity is Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of God. Though it is difficult for us to understand, Christ is fully God and fully man. As fully man, He was tempted but without sin. It is difficult for us to comprehend, through human experience, how He grew in His life here on earth, yet with complete divine awareness that He is also fully God. Yet we know this to be true. We cannot allow ourselves to diminish either capacity of Christ – we cannot overemphasize His humanity at the expense of His divinity, or vice versa. He is fully and in every way both God and man.

Christ was born through a human, Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit. God created all things through Christ, and He is God's only Son. Begotten of the Father means Christ is created by God the Father and yet of the same substance as God the Father. This is a Mystery of faith which we believe. Yet Christ is a Person of the Trinity, with His own nature.

When we speak of the Person of Christ, we speak in present tense. Though He walked on this earth for only 33 years, He continues to live now, with God the Father in heaven, and is as much fully human now as He was then. After all, if Christ is fully God and fully man, which we believe, and that is His identity and makeup, there is no way for Him now to suddenly not be fully man, simply because He has ascended to heaven.

We cannot comprehend how God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, came to inhabit Mary's womb as the Person of Christ – who already existed with the Father and Holy Spirit in heaven before His incarnation. But we know that He did, and therefore became also one with us, to take on our sin at the Cross. Thus, the Incarnation was not for a limited time, but for all of eternity. Christ dwells with us, and in us, and is transforming us into His image.

As we accept Christ as Savior and Lord, we invite Him to be Lord of our lives. This means we surrender our lives to Him, become bondservants of Him, and allow Him to rule and reign in our hearts, and to change our hearts from the inside out.

### **Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary**

We believe that Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin birth was necessary in order for Christ to be born fully human and fully God. Mary became the mother of God (*theotokos*: “God bearer”), because Christ was born fully God as well as fully man, and we cannot lessen His divinity by avoiding that term. While Mary did not create God, she gave birth to the very God who would save her at the Cross.

### **Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell**

Christ was condemned on our behalf, by leaders of the Jewish synagogue and by Pontius Pilate, representative of Rome, and was crucified for our sins. He died the death of a criminal on our behalf; was buried; and descended into hell to defeat death forever, and to unlock the gates of hell. Through Christ, we who receive Him as Savior and Lord are no longer enslaved to sin.

Soteriology is the study of salvation, Christ's work on the Cross. Theories of atonement, or why Christ died for us, include a satisfaction theory, in which Anselm suggests our sin has

robbed God of the righteousness due Him. To correct this, we would need to restore all righteousness and render more than was taken. No human is able to do this; only God can. But because man has sinned, man must repay. Only someone fully God and fully man (Christ) could satisfy this requirement. While any theory of atonement is insufficient, and represents only a partial human understanding of what took place at the Cross, these theories each contribute in a particular way to help us understand the incredible work of salvation Christ accomplished for us.

Another theory of atonement is the substitution theory, which says that a holy God cannot tolerate sin, and only God Himself can take the full punishment. This theory helps us understand how a loving God can take such a wrathful action as punishment for sin. Because God is holy, we in our sin nature would burn up in His presence. His wrath is against the sin, not us. He has made a way, through Christ, to reconcile us to Him and bring us back into His presence, which we originally lost in the Garden of Eden.

Other theories of atonement include Christ as conqueror. This theory helps us realize that through our sin, we have become enslaved to Satan and his demons. As part of His work on the Cross, and His descending into hell on our behalf, Christ has defeated Satan and set us free. While Satan and his demons continue to roam the earth, oppressing and distressing us, we have the option, through Christ, to recognize that Satan is defeated, and to step into the truth of our freedom and identity in Christ. This theory also reminds us that we are part of the Kingdom of God in Christ, and seems to go hand in hand with another theory that Christ is firstborn from the dead, leading us to begin our new life and take our place in the Kingdom of God.

Another theory of atonement is Christ as saving or moral example. He leads the way and shows us how to live. While this theory does not fully capture Christ's redemptive work on the Cross – and if misused can lead to a false “works” religion – it does provide a partial view of

how we are to order our lives after Him and surrender to Him; and of how we are to point the way to Him for others. We cannot manifest the fruits of the Spirit in our own strength; but if we do not see those fruits produced in our lives, we need to check our hearts and submit them more deeply and fully to Christ.

**The third day he rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty**

The resurrection of Christ is vital and central to all we believe as a Church. We believe the resurrection of Christ by faith. We were not there when Christ rose from the dead, but this truth has been passed down through the centuries, validated and affirmed by the Church on the basis of the testimonies of the first apostles and by the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Our primary evidence of the resurrection of Christ comes to us through Scripture. As we note the differences in each Gospel rendering of the resurrection story, we recognize that the differences actually affirm the event. If the event were not true, the differences would never have been left in the Bible texts; rather, they would have been harmonized. Furthermore, we know that an unprecedented, supernatural event of this magnitude would cause anyone to confuse details of what happened. The discrepancies therefore serve as evidence of the resurrection. We also note that every eyewitness and early Christian who was martyred for the Faith went to their death without changing their story and the truth of the resurrection they believed in.

What does the resurrection mean for us? It is confirmation that Christ truly is who He says He is: fully man and fully God. One of the key differences between Christ's resurrection and Christ raising Lazarus from the dead is that Christ rose of His own accord. Only God could raise Himself. Through His resurrection, Christ defeated Satan and death, reversing the sentence

of death that sent us originally out of the Garden of Eden. The resurrection of Christ opens the way for our new life, our reconciliation with God, and our eternal life with Him. We have this hope here and now, because Christ is risen from the dead.

If we choose to accept Christ as Lord and Savior, to embrace the fellowship of the suffering of Christ, to lay down our lives, and to follow Him to new life, the resurrection represents for us healing, wholeness and new life on the other side of the Cross. Often Christians do not struggle so much in going to the Cross – repenting of sins, asking forgiveness, surrendering their hearts to Christ – but they struggle to follow Him through the Cross to the other side. Resurrection represents our new life in Christ, and a foretaste of that fully redeemed and restored life that is to come in the new earth. In our greatest experiences of restoration in our lives here on earth, that is barely a glimpse of what our glorified lives will be in the new earth.

In His ascension into heaven following His resurrection, Christ not only opened the way for us to receive His Holy Spirit, and not only sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us; but also we see in Christ's resurrection – as firstborn from the dead – our future in glory. His glorified body – still fully human, but glorified – that we read about in Scripture is our future too. This gives us hope of the reality of heaven and the new earth – a real place with tangible existence, not some ethereal space of disembodied “presence,” but a genuine, glorified, restored human existence as God originally intended for us to be. That brings hope here and now.

### **From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead**

Eschatology is the study of last things. We believe that Christ will come again; that every person who has died will be raised to life; and that Christ will judge every person for his or her life. Those who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior will, after judgment, be resurrected to

eternal life with God. Those who have denied Christ will be resurrected to eternal damnation.

We do not believe that there is an elect few predestined for eternal life with God, but rather that all have the opportunity to come to know God and to accept Christ. God's grace flows freely to all people, and He pours His grace on each one to make Himself known and to draw them closer to Him, without violating their free will. But His grace can be resisted by free will. Some may choose not to receive His call, and may turn down His invitation for salvation through Christ.

Those who refuse God's invitation to salvation will be resurrected for eternity in hell.

We believe that hell is a place as real as heaven, and is a place of eternal torment. Those who live for eternity in hell will be alive and aware; they will not simply disappear. They will be separated from God, which includes separation from all that is good, because all goodness comes from God alone. It is less the case that God sentences a person to hell than that the person chooses hell for himself or herself by resisting God's prevenient grace and invitation to salvation. God is just. His judgment is fair and carries out His justice.

### **I believe in the Holy Ghost**

Pneumatology, or the study of the Holy Ghost, the Third Person of the Trinity, has not received the attention it should in the teachings of the Church today. The Bible has a lot to say about who this Third Person of the Trinity is. We first learn of the Holy Spirit through the pages of the Old Testament. God's Spirit hovers and broods over the face of the deep as God begins to create heaven and earth.

This same Holy Spirit is promised to us in the words of Christ, during His ministry on earth. This Third Person of the Trinity is of the same substance as the Father and the Son, of equal weight, and Scripture shows that the Holy Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son.

This has led to an unresolved controversy between the Eastern and Western Church, both sides attempting to not diminish the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the Triune nature of God. As with every aspect of the Trinity, it is beyond our understanding and, while we try as best we can to explain it in a way that brings unity in the Church, it still falls under the appellation of Mystery.

The earliest Christians first received the infilling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. While the Holy Spirit dwells within all who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior – guiding us, comforting us, convicting us, working in our hearts, revealing Christ, leading us into all truth – some Christians today still experience tangible expressions of the power of the Holy Spirit, which may include speaking in tongues. We must be responsible to submit any manifestations of the Holy Spirit to biblical and Church authority to prevent disruption that is not of God. The Church must guard against the extreme of perverting the gifts of the Spirit as if they possessed magical power; and the other extreme of blocking the Holy Spirit in favor of dry ritual. It is the Holy Spirit in the life of the church that works through the means of grace, conveys power in ordination of ministers, and manifests in the gifts of the Spirit so that the Body of Christ can function by the power of God.

The means of grace through which the Spirit moves in the Church include the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. God's grace begins to move and work in the life of a child or adult through baptism, symbolic of death and new life; and that baptism ushers the person into the community of the Church. The Eucharist is celebrated in remembrance of Christ's work on the Cross, and through the symbols of Christ's death and resurrection the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of those who partake. The Eucharist is not to be taken lightly, nor with aught against others, nor in a way which excludes others. The first Communion of the early Church were a

meal shared in community, on the first day of the week – Resurrection Day – as thanksgiving and a joyful remembrance of new life in Christ – the New Covenant.

### **I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church; the communion of saints**

Ecclesiology is the doctrine of the Church. The earthly Church is a representation of the spiritual Church, which includes the community of all believers, including those now in heaven, and the community of believers around the world. We believe the Church is called to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. This means the Church is called to function in unity, and not be divided from within by politics, judgments and unforgiveness, or divided without by interdenominational wars. Holy means the Church is to be sanctified and set apart for Christ – in the world, but not of the world. The catholic (universal) and apostolic nature of the Church means that all Christians are included in one body, with a common heritage and foundation of beliefs, shared across history and around the world. The Church, through apostolic succession, is to be the same Church today as the very first Church in the first century, founded on the same shared beliefs taught by Christ and passed down, undiluted, through the ages.

Several metaphors have been utilized to describe the Church, including the Body of Christ, with each member bringing unique gifts and playing a unique and indispensable role, as well as the Church serving as the hands and feet of Christ in the world; and the Agency of Christ's work in the world, albeit with the caution that we do and serve because Christ first does and serves in us. We are not the agency or hands and feet of Christ because we are the Church. Rather, because we are the Church, Christ moves in us and through us, with His agenda, not ours. Another analogy is the Church as New Israel, continuing God's redemption plan through the Messiah, and grafting in the Gentiles.

Each member of the Church is called to live in personal holiness, and to walk in sanctification. The Church is a vital part of a person's walking out salvation, and of accountability, growth and discipleship. While an individual can become saved outside of a Church, he or she requires the fellowship and teaching of a life-giving Church in order to walk out this salvation in his or her heart and life, and to not be picked off by the enemy.

### **The forgiveness of sins**

What is this sin nature that requires Christ's atoning work on the Cross? It is our turning away from God, separating ourselves from Him, that apart from Christ sentences us to hell. Sin is our rebellion against God, rooted in pride – believing we are anything apart from Him; refusing to surrender our will to Him.

Closely related to this understanding of sin is the question of theodicy: How can an all-powerful, loving God allow evil in this world? The answer is free will. God has given us free will, so we will choose to love Him and be in relationship with Him. The cost that He is willing to pay for us to freely choose to love Him indicates how important that loving relationship is. It has cost Him literally everything. Yet He deems we are worth this ultimate price.

Evil is something we as humans have done against God, not the other way around. It is an incredible testament to His love, and indicative of His unchanging nature that He doesn't compromise with us on this. He allows evil to exist fully, per our initial request in the Garden of Eden, because His plan is to redeem us fully. Not halfway, but fully. Not watered down, but as He initially planned. We continue to have free will to choose His way or our way. That is the highest act of love on His part. He wants His best for us, and He is willing to allow evil in the world – willing to not interfere with our free will – in order to get His best for us. That is love.

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The fact that He Himself has provided the way for this to happen, through Christ, is a testament to His power. Only God could make this plan for redemption and restoration possible. Evil cannot stand in the face of that power. This isn't just about eternity. Once we accept Christ, evil begins to bow down to Christ in our hearts, from that very moment. So the victory begins here and now and continues for eternity.

Our salvation through Christ is not merely a matter of asking forgiveness for sins we commit over and over. We are to allow the Holy Spirit to grow the fruits of the Spirit in us; to allow Christ to change our hearts, so that we will become more like Him, from the inside out – not by works, but by His work in us. This is the process of sanctification – working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) – and it is made possible by God's sanctifying grace that goes to work on our behalf. We need to be willing to walk in sanctification and to mature as believers in Christ – for the sake of ourselves, the Church, and the world.

### **The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.**

When Christ comes to judge each person, it is not a works-based judgment, as works do not earn salvation. But it is a matter of Christ judging our sin and removing it from us. Through sanctification, we have the opportunity already to embrace and begin that process of dying to self, so that our sin can come to death at the Cross and we can begin to be renewed in the image of Christ. It is necessary that we be crucified and die with Christ, so that Christ may live in us, and that we may live in new resurrection life ... here, and in the life to come. God is preparing for us a new heaven and a new earth, in which we who accept Christ as Lord and Savior will live with our glorified, resurrected bodies, in the way God originally intended for us to live. God Himself will dwell among us, and we will be His people, and He will be our God. Amen.