

A Stewardship Look at the Apostle's Creed

By the Rev. Dr. Richard L. Peterman*

I want to begin by telling you of a conversation I had with one of our bishops while on an itinerary in his synod. His father had been ailing, so he decided to take some time off and go back to the family farm in Minnesota, spending a week with his father. He said, "We had a great week of reminiscing." When it came to Sunday, his father suggested, "Denny, let's go to church!" They went to church together. On the way home they talked about the sermon. Among other things his father said, "Denny. I wished that just once the pastor would tell us what he believes." Then, Denny reflected on the sermon. As he did, he realized that as the pastor interpreted the text of the gospel for that day, he had indicated what Augustine believed about the text, what Luther believed about the text, and what Paul Tillich believed about the text. But he never indicated what he believed about the gospel for the day.

Every Christian is called to share his or her faith, where he or she finds himself or herself in life. You and I need to tell what God is doing — and has done — in our personal lives. As we tell our stories, God's story gets told. That's really what the Bible, is about. The Bible is a record of people who had an encounter with God and they decided to write it for the benefit of others. St. Paul was intensely personal. We all know his conversion experience because he was willing to put it down, to share it. We know what he believed: he wasn't afraid to say "I believe."

For me the Apostle's Creed is a starting place for this personal witness, for this living out of the Christian faith, because in the Creed I state personally — as well as corporately and publicly — what I believe. It's an oral confession. My life must be "in sync" with what I confess in the Creed. Consequently, I want to take a few minutes now to look at the Creed from the point of view of Christian Stewardship. I'm using Christian Stewardship in its broadest sense: "The stewardship of one's whole life not merely the stewardship of money." Christian Stewardship involves all of me in all of my life. Nothing is excluded.

The First Article of the Creed: "I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth."

That deals with what I call "the stuff of life." It deals with the material things of creation. It deals with the earth. It deals with all that goes with being human beings in this world. God, as the creator, is even now creating "ex nihilo," meaning he's creating out of nothing. And if God were to withdraw himself, everything would come to an end. God didn't, millions of years ago, create the earth and let it go. He's still very much involved in the creative process. And what he creates is good. That's what the Old Testament account tells us. After spinning out the account of what God created we're told, "Behold, God looked upon what he had made, and it was good." We are stewards of this good creation, these good gifts of God.

Twenty-five years ago, twenty-six years ago now, at the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi, Dr. Joseph Sitter made a speech that was way ahead of its time. He used words like ecology and environment before they became household words. In that presentation he made this point: God is my father. Jesus is my brother, and the earth is my sister; therefore, I will not rape the earth. He went and talked about our being stewards of the whole earth.

In explaining the first article of the Creed, Luther uses the personal pronoun — I, my, and me — 10 times. In so doing, he makes it quite clear we are stewards of God's creation, and each one of us must be a responsible steward. We must use properly what God has given us. Let's take just a quick look at two or three illustrations of how we can use creation properly or misuse it. Take a simple thing like wheat. A grain of wheat nodding its head in the golden sunshine is a glorious sight to behold. And it certainly becomes a blessing when bread — made from that wheat — feeds a hungry stomach. But it can become a curse when it is misused as someone overdrinks the liquor made from the grain of wheat, becoming a burden on society.

Or consider the poppies that grow. During World War II, I lived in Iran. I remember seeing acres upon acres of poppies in bloom. I'd never seen a more colorful sight. When poppies are used to make morphine that soothes a pain-wracked body, that's a blessing. But the same morphine can become a curse when someone becomes a heroin addict and misuses it. Likewise, God's gold in his hills becomes a blessing when it provides food and clothing and shelter. It becomes a curse when someone kills another to get more of it.

The first article of the creed declares that nothing belongs to the creature but rather it's all the creator's. You and I are stewards of the creator's creation for a short time; namely, our lifetime on earth.

I have no right to say, "It's mine." Yet, I do. I do say. "My car, my house, my suit of clothing." But it is not mine! I'm not going to take it with me. It's only something I use while I'm passing through this current life. Luther spoke of the "incurvatus in se" — the curved in upon self, the orientation of I, my and me. A proper understanding — and the proper exercise of stewardship — turns that around, causing us to see ourselves as turned outward toward the neighbor, using all of God's creative gifts to serve the neighbor. Creation is a tool to be used in serving our neighbor, a tool to be used in sharing God's love.

There can be no dualism between the spiritual and the material. But there is an awful lot of that being preached nowadays, especially by the television evangelists. Every once in a while I flick the dial to hear what they are saying. Invariably, in some form or other they are saying, "We have got to be more spiritual and less material." That's a misunderstanding of what it means to be a Christian; it's not biblical. To see a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material is a Greek concept. There is no dualism in the Christian faith. Instead, the material for the Christian is holy; it becomes a way to express a spiritual sensitivity.

Take a common thing like worship: You went to church this morning walking on shoe leather. Or, you rode in a metal/steel automobile, sitting on a leather or fabric seat, rolling on rubber tires. When you got to church, you walked into a brick building, or a cement block building, or a stone building, or a frame building, walking on asphalt tile. Then you sat on a wooden pew, sang

hymns to the glory of God out of a paper hymn book printed with ink. What can be more material than that? You used the material to worship God.

Look at the story of the Good Samaritan. How did the Good Samaritan show his spiritual sensitivity for his neighbor in need? Did he get down and pray? As important as prayer is, we have no indication of prayer. Instead, the Good Samaritan used oil, wine, linen, a donkey, an inn, and coins, to show his spiritual sensitivity towards that man in need.

I want to say it again, the material becomes a way in which I can express my Christian stewardship in reaching out to my neighbor in love. Our Lord was concerned about our use of creation. He told us to pray for “our daily bread.” He told us to “give a cup of cold water in his name.” And also, if we have two coats, we are to give one away. He calls us to be responsible stewards of creation, to see stewardship as what we do with our daily lives.

The Second Article: “I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.”

In the second article of the Creed, I confess publicly, personally and corporately, that Jesus is my Lord, and I spell out what I believe about Jesus. What we confess in that second article of the Creed is not logical. It’s not logical to believe that a woman conceived as a virgin. It’s not logical to believe that God became a baby and had to have his diapers changed. It’s not logical to believe that God died and that God raised Himself again from the dead. It’s not rational. It’s absurd. Yet, we believe. That’s precisely it: We believe! I didn’t suck that out of my thumb. I didn’t get that from my brain, but rather that was a gift to me. It was a gift from the Holy Spirit, given to me in Baptism, before I was aware of it, before I could say, thank you. The Holy Spirit has led me to say, “I believe.”

Emil Brunner, in *Revelation and Reason*, said, “I do not believe because an apostle has convinced me, but I believe because the same Holy Spirit who has led the apostle to faith has led me to faith.” It’s a gift to say, “I believe.” The only response to this gift of God is again, “I believe.” There is no other response. To attempt to pay him back is ludicrous. To try to learn the right to this gift is impossible. The only thing we can do is to say, “I believe.”

Luther says it so well in his explanation to the second article of the Creed: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the father from eternity is also true man. Born of the Virgin Mary is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, secured and delivered me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I might be his, live under Him and His kingdom, serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns through all eternity. This is certainly true.”

Again, in explaining that article of the Creed, he uses the personal pronoun — I, my, or me — nine times. He’s really talking about stewardship. God is acting in Christ on my behalf. He’s given me the free gift of faith. Now I am his, and “I am to live under him in everlasting innocence, righteousness and blessedness.” That’s Christian stewardship. That involves all of me, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year.

No area of life is excluded from our stewardship. Archbishop William Temple once said, “It’s a great mistake to think that God is interested only in religion.” And Gibran, in *The Prophet*, wrote: “The old prophet had discussed clothes, pleasure, freedom, laws, when a old priest broke in and said, ‘Speak to us of religion.’ The prophet replied, ‘Have I spoken this day of aught else? Who can separate his faith from his actions, or his belief from his occupation?’ ” You can’t.

Stewardship is not a matter of 10 percent of my money, rather it’s 100 percent of me. When I say that, I don’t mean that I’m not an advocate of tithing as a reasonable first step in our giving. As Christian stewards we must be concerned with every dollar we use. The money I use to buy shoes for my children is just as important to God as the money I give to the church. The money I use to provide food and clothing and shelter for my family is just as important to God as the money I give to the church. Therefore, I just decide what proportion I want to use to express my Christian faith through the church.

Frankly, I resent what Fortress Press prints on its offering envelopes. It says, “For God’s Work.” I resent it because it implies that the only work God can do is with the money I put in that envelope. That’s not true; God is interested in all of the money I have and earn and spend, or invest, or give. I need to sit down and determine what proportion I want to use in each of these categories. It’s the whole person, with all that I possess, that’s involved in stewardship.

Luther said that each one of us is called and have our standing-place in the orders of creation. Just by being born we come into a family. And we have a calling, a standing place, in that family as a mother, a father, a child. Likewise we have a calling, a standing place, in the economic order, as consumers or producers. We also have a standing place, a calling, in the political order because we’re members of a state and we’re all involved in some way in a political order. But we’re also members of the church, and we have a calling, a standing place, in the church. That means we cannot withdraw from the world to become “more spiritual.” Our stewardship must be in the world. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” How are you going to be the light of the world except you are in the world? He also said, “You are the salt of the earth.” How are you going to be the salt of the earth, except you get into the “stew of the world?” That’s one reason why Luther was opposed to nunneries and monasteries, because he felt they were withdrawing from the world, they weren’t making their impact in the world. Therefore, he could say: “The nun in her cloister renders no greater service to God than the wife who stays home and brews beer for a tired husband.” He saw both of these as a way of exercising stewardship, but he didn’t see one as more holy than the other or more spiritual than the other.

The third article of the Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints...” Again Luther uses the personal pronoun – I, my, me – nine times in explaining this article. This article deals with our spirit-filled lives as the communion of saints. The communion of saints includes all Christians – from the beginning of the Christian era to the end of time.

We are saints. Yet, we remain sinners. We are *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously just — yet sinners). I like to use the phrase, “sinful saints.” That’s what we are. We’re saints, but we’re still sinful. That means we’re never free from sin. There’s a constant struggle that goes on within us. To use St. Paul’s illustration, the old man (Adam) is still there, and the old man struggles

with the new man (Christ) in me. Every day I need to remind myself that I am baptized. And every morning drown the old man, so that Christ can come forth. But as Bishop Berrgrau said: “I’ve found that the old man can swim.” We’ve all learned that, haven’t we? The old man can swim. There’s always that tension between the old Adam, the old me, and the new me, the Christ.

When I was at the seminary, they invited a retired professor, Dr. Henry Offerman, to come back to give a guest lecture. After his lecture he asked for questions. Among the questions was this one: “Dr. Offerman, at the age of 85, are you any better as a Christian than you were 50 years ago?” As he spoke with a German accent, he started pulling on his goatie and said, “Ach, yah, much better, but much worse.” You never get out of this dilemma. We are the fellowship of the forgiven. As we exercise our stewardship we need forgiveness because in the exercise of our stewardship we are going to fall short. We’re going to make mistakes. We’re going to do things out of improper motives. We’re going to misuse our God-given gifts. That’s why every Sunday we need to confess and we need to hear the declaration of forgiveness.

Sin — or the risk of sin — cannot be a cop-out. We’re going to make mistakes in our exercising our stewardship, but God understands that because we’re sinful saints; we have to trust him for forgiveness. We cannot withdraw for the fear of falling short or making mistakes or sinning.

We are the church and the church is dynamic, not static. That means we have got to be active. I remember, as a child, singing, “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” In that hymn we sing that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, meaning the church. As a little kid, I would visualize that hymn as we sang it. As we sang it that portion that says, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” I saw my congregation gathered with the gates of hell coming toward it. And I saw the church standing firm against the gates of hell. It should be the other way around. It’s the church that is militant; it’s the church that’s moving against the gates of hell. And the gates of hell are going to be battered down by the militant church.

All too often, though, the church has been something less than the church militant moving forth with the gospel. In some places, the church — as represented by local congregations — is merely a great restaurant. When I went to my first parish, that congregation was known as the church famous for turkey dinners. Or in other places, the church — as represented by the local congregation — is a sewing center, or a gossip society. The church has got to be more than an ecclesiastical PTA. It’s got to be more than a glorified Rotary, or Kiwanis Club.

The church is the steward of the gospel, and everything you and I do as Christians needs to give witness to that gospel in some way or other, admitting that we’re not always going to succeed, but yet that’s what God is calling us to do. The church, every congregation, is the community in love. Every congregation is called to serve the neighbor in love, literally love the hell out of people. That’s not a profanity, that’s a theological truth. That’s what we’re to be about. But that’s not easy because the sinner gets in the way, and the sinner says, “but why me?” We’ve got to work at loving. Jesus said, “Thou shalt love.” Why did he say, “Thou shalt love?” Because he knew that we had to work on it, that it was not going to be easy. As Jaroslav Pelikan says, “Love does not arise with lubricated ease out of a Christian.” No, we have got to work at it: Indeed, we need to pull out all the stops to use all of our gifts, as we serve our neighbor in love.

I want to close with another true story. It involves a pastor in Pennsylvania. He served one congregation for 50 years, in a small coal-mining town. When he went to that congregation – In the depth of the depression of the 1930's – he had a wedding within the first year. The wedding was the daughter of the only wealthy man in that congregation, the man who owned the coalmine, for whom all the other men in the parish worked. After the wedding, that man gave the pastor a neatly wrapped box. He opened the box, flipped open the lid, and in the box was a pair of black, kid gloves. He was so disgusted that he shut the box and put it in his bureau drawer. Fifty years later, when it came time to retire, he had to move out of the parsonage. It was then, as he was packing things in boxes, that he got to the bureau drawer. As he started to take things out of the bureau drawer, and pack them in a box, he came upon this box of gloves. He removed the lid and thought he'd try on the gloves. He couldn't get his fingers inside the gloves, because there was something rolled up in every finger. In each of the fingers was a rolled-up ten-dollar bill. One hundred dollars: He said to himself, "If only I had done that fifty years ago when I really needed that one hundred dollars." He didn't benefit because he didn't use the gift! He hid the gift!

God is calling us to use all of our gifts – now – to serve our neighbor in love as a witness of the gospel.

About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Richard L. Peterman, 1923-1997, was a longtime champion of stewardship -- as parish pastor, as synod official and administrator in the United Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church in America (predecessor bodies to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). After retirement in 1987, he continued as a presenter for Lutheran Lay Movement for Stewardship and guest speaker. He presented this paper to the Michigan Synod of the Lutheran Church in America in 1986.