

APOSTLES' CREED

Introduction

OPENING ACTIVITY

Start by telling participants that they will be summarizing the story of their lives. This can be done verbally, but it may be best to provide paper and writing utensils. This activity will be done in steps.

Give several minutes to participants to summarize their life story in a paragraph and ask them to share. Note the kinds of things they share.

After everyone shares, ask participants to summarize their summary into one sentence. Note which details they decide to share and which they choose to omit.

After everyone shares their sentence, ask participants to summarize their sentence into one simple sentence of 3-5 words. If you had to tell your life's story in 3-5 words, how would you do it?

STUDY

The entire story of God's interaction with his people is a huge story filled with all kinds of events and episodes, twists and turns, and ups and downs. We're blessed to have so much of that story preserved for us in the Bible. You may have noticed, though, that the Bible is a massive book. It's a challenge to digest the whole story in a short amount of time.

So, the people of God have been summarizing the story of their relationship with God for millennia. They've found ways to take a huge story and boil it down in such a way that we could tell it in just a few paragraphs, perhaps even just a couple sentences. These summaries don't say everything there is to say about God and his work in the world, but they do say some of the most important things about who God is, who we are as his people, what we're doing here, and where things are ultimately headed.

Let's take a look at some of them.

One of the oldest summaries of the faith comes from the Old Testament. These are words that the people of God in the Old Testament would say and pray regularly. This summary of the faith is called the *Shema*. *Shema* is Hebrew for "hear/listen." *Shema* is the first word of this passage.

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9

- What do these verses tell you about God?
 - *(He is Lord. He is "our" God, meaning he is the God of a particular people. He is One.)*
- What do these verses tell you about how the people of God are supposed to live in relationship with him?
 - *(We are to hear these words. We are to love God. We shall hold these words on our heart. We should talk about these words at all points of the day. We should place His word in prominent spots in our lives where we will see them frequently.)*
- How would saying words like these regularly form and shape your own relationship with God?

Fast forwarding nearly two millennia to the times of the early church, we find that the people of God remained in the habit of summarizing the story of the faith, especially in light of Jesus life and work.

The New Testament presents us with several passages that many believe are early creeds. These verses perhaps could have been used during worship and some of them could even have been set to music like our hymns are. Let's see what some of these summaries have to say.

This first passage comes from one of Paul's letters to the Christians in Corinth. In a pagan Roman world full of many different "gods," Paul clearly articulates a concise summary of the God in which Christians believe.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:6

- What similarities do you notice between this and the *Shema* passage from Deuteronomy 6?
 - *(Both verses address the oneness of God. Both verses mention God as "Lord.")*
- What does this verse have that Deuteronomy 6 doesn't?

- *(This verse calls God "Father." This also verse equates Jesus with the Father. This verse furthermore addresses Jesus' involvement in the act of creating all things.)*

Another summary of the faith we find in the New Testament is in Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi. This summary is an expanded summary that gives more details about the work of Jesus and its meaning for the world.

Read Philippians 2:5-11

- What does this summary teach you about Jesus?
- Now that Jesus is exalted and has the name above every name, what does that mean for the world?
 - *(Every knee should bow and every tongue should confess Jesus as Lord. Notice the expanding confession of Jesus as Lord from 1 Corinthians 8.)*
- What do you think it means to "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus?" What might it look like for you to empty yourself and humble yourself?

If times permits, there's one more New Testament summary of the story of Jesus that might be fun to look at. (If you don't have time, know that this passage will be explored in greater depth at the 2022 LCMS Youth Gathering. It's the theme verse for the Gathering!)

Read Colossians 1:15-20

- What does this summary of the story say about Jesus that others haven't?
- What does this summary say about where we fit in the story of Jesus?

Now, why have we been talking about these summaries of the Christian story? We want to set some context for the summary of the story that we use frequently as the people of God today. Very often during worship, we will summarize the entire story of what we believe in three paragraphs. We summarize the story using the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed is a kind of hand-me-down that has made its way down through the generations of God's people. More than likely, this is the creed you learned about when you went through your Confirmation experience.

Say the Apostles' Creed together:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,*

suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God
the Father almighty.
From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

- What does the Apostles' Creed tell you about God? How does it build on other confessions of the faith or other summaries of the story of God's work?
 - *(By way of reminder, this creed is called the "Apostles' Creed" because it summarizes the teaching of the apostles. It wasn't written explicitly by them, but it has its name because its content is in line with what the apostles taught. It matters to follow the teaching of the apostles because they were eyewitnesses of Jesus and received their teaching directly from him.)*
- What does the creed tell you about yourself?
- What's unclear or what could use more explanation?
- What aspects of the creed are you still curious about?

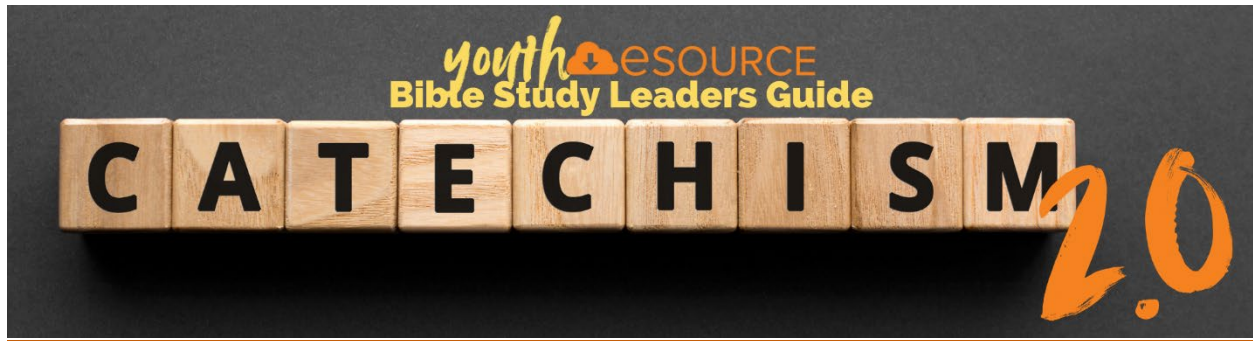
The summary we have in the Apostles' Creed is worth talking about because we think it's important to pass the story of God and his work on to you. This summary has been shared generation after generation, and we pray that the Lord will work through you to keep passing it down to future generations. The story of God's work in the world is continuing to unfold all around you, and it even includes you.

- How do you see yourself fitting into the story of God's work in the world?

CLOSING

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank and praise you for your work in the world. Thank you for calling a people to yourself and for continuing to work in them to pass the faith down to even more generations. Bless us as we go about our week, living in your kingdom. Open our eyes to see you at work all around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!



FIRST ARTICLE

OPENING DISCUSSION

Over the course of this study, we will be exploring the creativity of God. To get our minds going and to begin our conversation, let's talk about some of our own creativity.

- What is something that you have made that you are most proud of?
 - *(There's opportunity to talk about a lot of different things here. This could be a work of art, something else made by hand, a craft, a recipe, or anything else that required some degree of creativity.)*
- What about it made you proud?

STUDY

Recall that we are exploring the Apostles' Creed, one of the more popular summaries of the entire story of the Christian faith. Remember, too, that this summary not only tells the story of the faith, but it also answers some important life questions like:

- Who is God?
- Who am I?
- What are we doing here?
- Where is everything ultimately headed?

In this study, we want to focus our attention on the "First Article" of the Apostles' Creed. In particular, we want to spend some time dwelling on the creativity of God. The First Article of the creed says,

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.*

Read Genesis 1:1-5 (If you have time and would like to read more, read all of Genesis 1)

- How did God make the heavens and the earth? *(By his word. He speaks it into existence.)*
- When God saw the things he had made (in this case when he saw the light), what did he see? *(He saw that it was good.)*

Read Genesis 1:31

- How did God react when he saw everything that he had made on the end of the sixth day? (*He saw that it was very good.*)

When God created the heavens and the earth and everything that fills them, he chose to do it with the power of his word. From the beginning, he has been a God who speaks. When he speaks, stuff happens.

Let's shift gears now and focus on how God creates humanity.

Read Genesis 2:5-9; 15-25

- How does God make man? Notice: there are two pieces to this creation. (*He forms him out of the dust of the ground. Then he breathes into him the breath of life and the man becomes a living soul/being.*)
- How does God make woman? (*He uses a rib from the man.*)
- Noticing the difference between how God creates the rest of the heavens and the earth and how he creates man and woman, what does this tell you about the relationship between God and humanity?

What does this mean? That's the classic Lutheran question, especially when talking about matters related to the *Small Catechism*. What does God's creative work mean for you?

1. First, it means that God doesn't make junk. When he creates things, there is a goodness to them because of the one who made them.

Read Psalm 139:14

- What does the Psalmist say about the work of God?
 - How do you react to the statement that YOU are fearfully and wonderfully made?
2. God's creative work also means that He intentionally made you, body and spirit. Both your body and your spirit matter to God. Your whole person is important to God.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20

- When Paul talks about being bought with a price, what is he talking about? (*He's talking about the price Jesus paid on the cross with his own blood, his own life.*)
 - What does it look like for you to honor God with your body?
3. Third, God's creative work means that He still takes care of you. He doesn't make things and then discard them or even just leave them be. He chooses to keep caring for the things he's made.

Consider a piece of Luther's Explanation to the First Article of the Creed: *"I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them."*

Read Matthew 6:25-33

- What are some of the creatures God still takes care of in this passage? (*Birds, Lilies*)
- How does knowing God still takes care of you impact how you live your everyday life?

There's a whole lot more that could be said about what it means to confess the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. We couldn't possibly plumb the depths of God's creative work in a single Bible study.

But one other piece to consider when it comes to God's creativity is his motivation for making the heavens and the earth and everything that fills them in the first place. Why would God choose to be a creating God? Why would God choose to make someone like you? Martin Luther in his Explanation to the First Article says it like this: *"All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any worthiness or merit in me."*

St. Augustine of Hippo (A bishop from the 4th- 5th century AD that Luther liked a lot) said, *"You made it not because you needed it, but from the fullness of your goodness."*

God creates because He is a good God and because he loves to be in relationship with the things He has made.

Read 1 John 4:7-8

Read James 1:17-18

- How does knowing God creates out of love shape your own view of God?
- How does knowing God creates out of love shape your own view of other creatures of God (humans, animals, plants, earth, space, etc.)?

Finally, how do we respond to the wonderful works of our creator God? Luther says, *"For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him."*

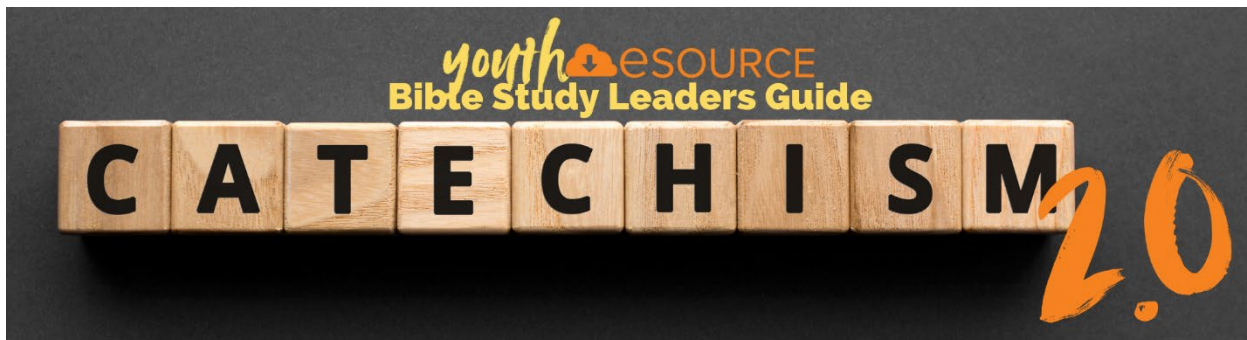
Read 1 Timothy 4:4-5

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

- What would it look like for you to "thank and praise, serve and obey" God this week?

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, you are worthy of all praise and glory for the work of your hands. Continue to sustain and care for the things you have made and show yourself present and active in your creation. Work in us that we might also care well for the things you have made which you have entrusted to our care. All this we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen!



SECOND ARTICLE

OPENING DISCUSSION

In this study, we will be unpacking the redemptive work of God, specifically in His Son, Jesus. To talk about redemption is to talk about God buying something back and taking possession of it himself. To get the mental wheels turning, let's talk about what we might buy back at all costs.

Go around the group and ask,

- What is the one thing in your life that you would buy back at all costs?

This could be a place to play a video or share a news article about someone who paid a great deal of money for something that seemed insignificant to others. Or how an important lost item was found.

Recall from the previous study that the God who creates does so because of His love. It is the same love that leads Him to buy back His creation at great cost to Himself. That's what the next article of the Apostles' Creed is all about. The story of God's work that begins with creation, continues with redemption.

By way of a refresher, here is how that article of the creed goes:

*And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God*

the Father almighty.

From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, takes center stage in the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed. There's a lot to say about who Jesus is, what he does, and what it means for us to live in his kingdom. Let's start with a story.

Read John 20:24-29

(This is the story of Thomas' interaction with Jesus after he encounters Jesus risen from the dead. Notice especially what Thomas says about Jesus when he sees Him.)

- What does Thomas call Jesus when he sees Him risen from the dead? (*1. My Lord 2. My God.*)

Luther's Explanation to the Second Article of the Creed begins, *"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord."*

What does it mean to call Jesus, "Lord?" It means to confess that he is God and that he reigns over all things as their creator and redeemer.

Read Romans 10:9-10

Read John 1:1-5; 14

Read Hebrews 1:1-3

- What do you discover about Jesus from these verses?
- Which of them resonates most with you? Why?

One of the hallmarks of Christianity is the belief that the creator God entered His creation. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus was active in creation in the beginning (cf. John 1:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20). When creation entered a fallen state on account of humanity's sinfulness, the creator God was not content to leave his creation in its fallen, broken state. He Himself entered that creation taking on the form of a man. All this He does out of His love for the things He has made and His desire to have it all belong to Him.

We see glimpses of Jesus as the creator working powerfully in his creation. This is what makes so many of Jesus' miracles such powerful stories to read.

Read Mark 4:35-41

- How does Jesus calm the storm? (*With his word.*)
- Why is this significant? (*It was the same word of God that created all of creation in the beginning. See Psalm 95*)

Christians believe that the Creator entered creation so that he might redeem it all. Now, what does it mean to "redeem?" To "redeem" is to buy back. Redeeming involves purchasing and payment. It also involves ownership and possession. To call Jesus the Redeemer is to call him the person who has made payment so that he might take possession of what he has bought.

Luther's Explanation to the Second Article says it this way, *"Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death."*

- According to Luther, what or whom did Jesus redeem/buy back? *(ME, a lost and condemned person.)*
- From whom did Jesus redeem us/ buy us back? *(From all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil.)*
- What did Jesus use as payment? *(Not gold or silver, but his own blood and his suffering and death.)*

There are numerous places in the Scriptures that describe our need for redemption and Jesus' work to redeem us. Here are couple examples:

Read Galatians 4:4-5

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21

- What are the results of Jesus' redeeming work? *(Galatians: We receive adoption as children of God. 2 Corinthians: We become the righteousness of God.)*

Like in our confession of God as Creator, when we confess God as our Redeemer, we are also confessing a work of God that is born out of His love for us.

Read 1 John 4:10

- How is love described here? *(Not as our love toward God, but as his love toward us.)*
 - *(Leader Note: The word "propitiation" is a way of saying that Jesus makes complete satisfaction for our sinfulness.)*

Read John 15:12-13

- What does Jesus say is the greatest kind of love? *(Someone laying down their life for their friends.)*
- How do we see Jesus loving us with that greatest kind of love?
- How does it make you feel to be loved like that?

Now, what are the results of Jesus' redeeming work?

Listen to the last paragraph Luther's Explanation to the Second Article: *"That I may be his own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."*

- What does Luther say the results of Jesus' redeeming work are? *(That I may be Christ's own. That I may live under Him in His kingdom.)*

Read 2 Corinthians 5:15

- What does it mean to belong to Christ? *(That you no longer live to yourself.)*
- What might it look like for you not to belong to yourself?

Read 1 Peter 2:9

- How does Peter describe a people who belong to Christ? *(As a people for His own possession)*
- What do the people who belong to Christ do? *(They proclaim the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.)*

It is a real comfort to hear that Jesus makes us his own and that we now live as his redeemed people, but how can we be confident that this is the best way to live? We remain confident in Jesus because He is risen from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation upon which we rest.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Read Colossians 3:1-4

- How does Jesus' resurrection from the dead affect your confidence in the things Jesus promises?
- What does it mean for you to set your minds on the things that are above?

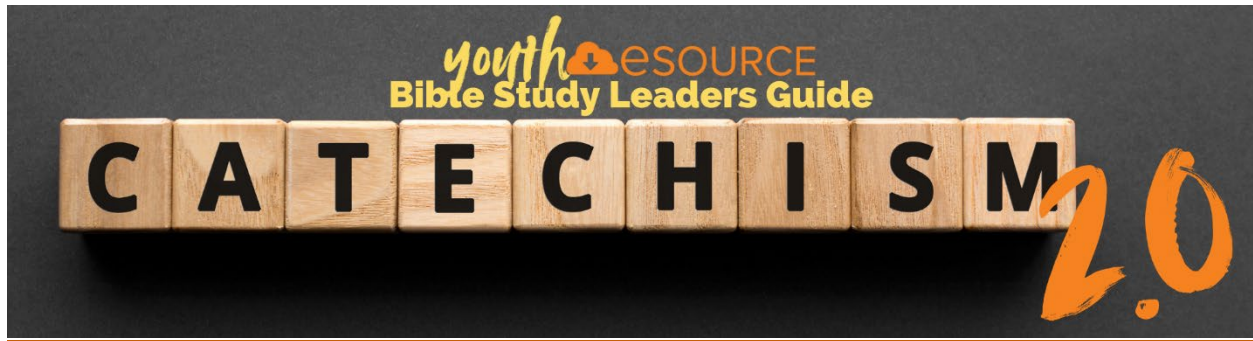
Finally, when we confess the second article of the Apostles' Creed, we are saying that we believe we will live with Jesus forever in the life everlasting. Jesus' redeeming work has eternal implications.

Read Revelation 21:1-4

- Which aspect of these promises are you looking forward to the most?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, redeemer of the world, your great work of love on the cross has bought us back from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Guard us and keep us always close to you as we wait for you to make all things new. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



THIRD ARTICLE

OPENING DISCUSSION

In this study, we will explore the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in and through the church. To get the conversation started, ask the following questions:

- When you hear the words, "Holy Spirit," what comes to mind?
- When you hear the word, "church," what comes to mind?

STUDY

Throughout this series of studies on the Apostles' Creed, we have been seeking to tell the story of the Christian faith. It is a story that began with God's work of creation and continued with God's redeeming work in Jesus. The natural place to go next is to ask the question, "What now? Now that Jesus has redeemed his people from sin, death, and the power of the devil, what comes next for the people of God?"

The Third Article of the creed addresses these questions. That article goes like this:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Perhaps the best place to begin is to ask, "Who is the Holy Spirit?" The simple answer is that the Holy Spirit is God, one of the three persons of the Trinity.

When we open the Bible, we find that the Spirit also (along with the Father and the Son) is involved in the acts of creation.

Read Genesis 1:2

Read Job 33:4

Read Psalm 104:30

- What do these verses tell you about the Holy Spirit?

We also see the Holy Spirit actively involved during the work of Jesus' ministry.

Read Matthew 3:13-17

Read Luke 4:16-21

- How do you see the Holy Spirit working in these verses?
- What does Jesus say about his relationship with the Holy Spirit in Luke 4? (*The Spirit of the Lord is upon him. The Spirit has anointed him to proclaim good news, liberty, recovering of sight, the year of the Lord's favor, etc.*)
- How would you have reacted to Jesus' words if you had been listening to Jesus' words 2,000 years ago?

Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus makes explicit promises about the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's future work.

Read John 14:25-27

Read John 16:4b-11

- Whom does Jesus say the Father will send in his name? (*The Helper, the Holy Spirit. Notice the presence of all three persons of the Trinity here.*)
- What will the Holy Spirit do? (*He will teach all things and bring them to remembrance (14:26). He will convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. (16:8)*)

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus gives his Holy Spirit to His disciples, and a little while after His ascension, the Holy Spirit comes onto the disciples in a powerful way at Pentecost.

Read John 20:19-23

Read Acts 2:1-4

- In John, receiving the Holy Spirit allows the disciples to do what? (*Forgive sins and withhold forgiveness.*)
- In Acts, what does the Holy Spirit enable the disciples to do? (*Speak in other tongues/languages as the Spirit enables them.*)

This has been a bit of a whirlwind tour of some of the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the Scriptures. There's actually a lot more we could say about the Spirit and what He does. Chiefly, the Holy Spirit makes us holy. That means he sets us apart for God. He convicts us of our sin and points us to our Savior, Jesus.

Take a look at how Luther explains the Third Article of the creed about the Holy Spirit. Luther says, *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."*

- According to this explanation, who is responsible for faith in Jesus? (*Not ourselves. It is all the work of the Holy Spirit.*)

Read John 15:16

Read Psalm 14:3

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3

- How does it make you feel to know that the Holy Spirit is the one responsible for the work of faith?

Knowing that the Holy Spirit is the one responsible for bringing people to faith through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we can sometimes be confronted with the reality that not all receive and believe this Gospel message. How do we account for this?

To begin, we confess that the Holy Spirit desires all to be saved. This is what the Scriptures teach us.

Read 1 Timothy 2:3-6

Read 2 Peter 3:8-9

- What do these verses teach us about God's desire for people to be saved? (*They teach us that he desires all to be saved. They also teach us that he is patient. His patience may seem slow to us, but it is intentional so that more people might come to repentance.*)
- How do you see the patience of God working in your own life?

Why then, doesn't everyone believe in Jesus as Lord? It is because the Holy Spirit can be resisted or even rejected. Hear what the Scriptures have to say:

Read Matthew 23:37

Read Luke 14:16-24

- What does Jesus say about resistance and rejection of the Holy Spirit?

If we go back to Luther's Explanation, we see that the work of the Holy Spirit is not limited merely to an individual level. Sure, He calls, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps ME in the faith, but he also does this for the whole church. Luther says,

"In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

"In this Christian church he daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers."

The Christian God is a God who works through means. He chooses to use particular people and particular things of the earth to deliver his promises and grace. The church is the group of people in which the Holy Spirit works.

The church is all the people the Holy Spirit has gathered to Jesus. This includes people all over the world from every race, language, and ethnicity. It includes people of all time, both those who are living and even those who have died in the faith. It is a glorious picture. Hear what the Scriptures tell us about the church:

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

- To what images does Paul compare the church? *(To a body)*
- How does this image of the church impact how you view the body of believers in your local context?
- How does this image change how we think about people in our church that struggle, suffer or rejoice?

Read Ephesians 2:19-22

- What image does Paul use to describe the church here? *(A household built on a foundation)*
- Who is the cornerstone? *(Jesus)*
- How does this remind us of what holds us together when we might disagree or be different from other people in our church?
- How does this image affect how you view the church you're a part of?

As we continue our life together as God's people the church, can we expect things to go perfectly? No, we can't. The church, although it is the people in which the Holy Spirit works to deliver the forgiveness of sins and the promises of eternal life, remains an imperfect people. But our hope is that one day the entire church will celebrate the victory of Jesus over Satan and all the forces of darkness when Jesus returns. Then, the church will enjoy life together eternally in perfection. This eternal hope brings the story told by the Apostles' Creed full circle to its glorious conclusion.

Read Isaiah 25:6-9

Read Revelation 7:9-17

- What are some of your favorite words and images from these verses?
- How does the hope of eternal life affect the way you live as God's people in the present moment?

This is a great moment to go back and read the entire Apostles Creed together slowly. Give everyone a chance to remember all pieces of our faith and our understanding about God that are in these words.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious Father, you send your Spirit in the name of Jesus to turn hearts toward yourself. Turn us again, O Lord, and renew us with your promises of forgiveness and eternal life that you so graciously give. Guard us and keep us in the faith by your Spirit until the day your Son returns. All these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen!