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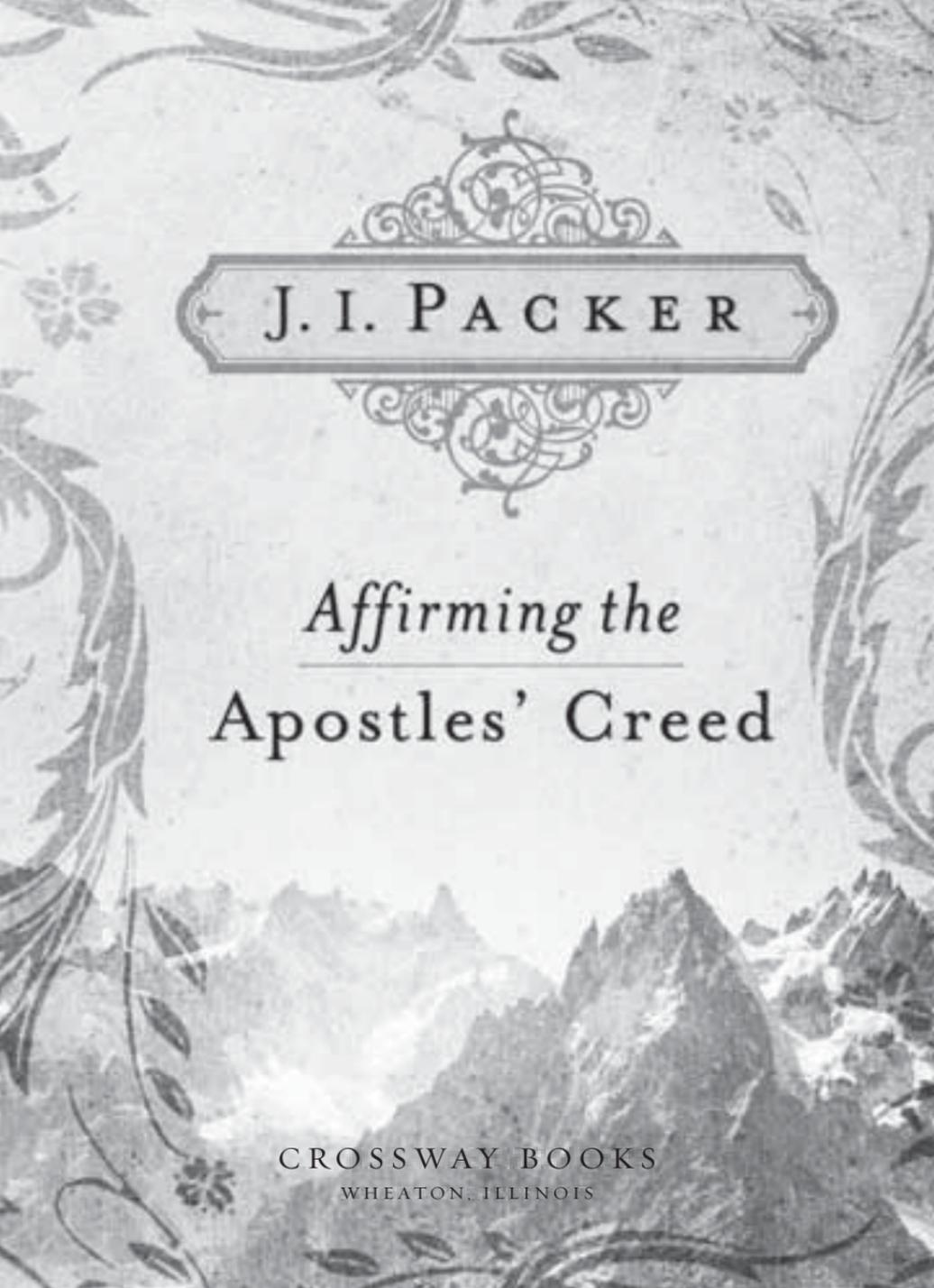
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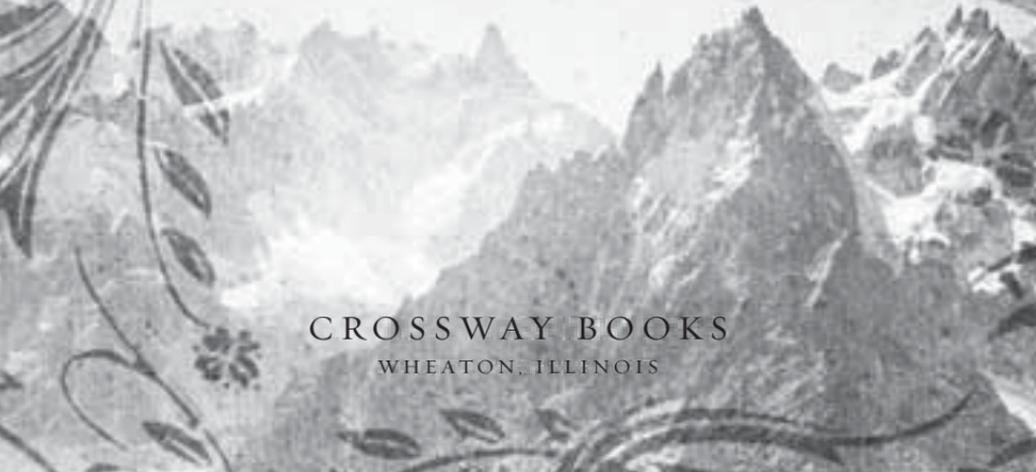
The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life

A decorative floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns surrounds the central text. At the top, a decorative flourish leads into a horizontal banner containing the author's name. Below the banner is another decorative flourish.

J. I. PACKER

Affirming the

Apostles' Creed

A grayscale illustration of a mountain range with jagged peaks and snow-covered slopes, positioned at the bottom of the cover.

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Affirming the Apostles' Creed

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This book was formerly part of *Growing in Christ*, copyright © by J. I. Packer, originally published under the title *I Want to Be a Christian*.

Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Keane Fine

Cover photo: Veer

First printing, 2008

Printed in the United States of America

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Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-0416-7

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-0415-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Packer, J. I. (James Innell)

Affirming the Apostles' Creed / J. I. Packer.

p. cm.

“This book was formerly part of *Growing in Christ* by J. I. Packer, originally published under the title *I want to be a Christian*” —

T. p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-0210-1 (tpb)

I. Apostles' Creed. I. Packer, J. I. (James Innell) *Growing in Christ*. II. Title.

BT003.3.P33 2008

238'.11—dc22

2007045821

VP 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Apostles' Creed

*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, dead, and buried:
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick 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.*



P R E F A C E

If you are going to travel cross-country on foot, you need a map. Now there are different kinds of maps. One sort is the large-scale relief map, which marks all the paths, bogs, crags, and so on in detail. Since the walker needs the fullest information about his chosen route, he must have a map of that sort. But for choosing between the various ways he might go, he could well learn more, and more quickly, from a small-scale map that left out the detailed geography and just showed him the roads and trails leading most directly from one place to another. Well-prepared walkers have maps of both kinds.

If life is a journey, then the million-word-long Holy Bible is the large-scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-word Apostles' Creed (so called, not because apostles wrote it—despite later legend, they didn't—but because it teaches apostolic doctrine) is the simplified road map, ignoring much but enabling you to see at a glance the main points of Christian belief. *Creed* means “belief”; many Christians of former days used to call this Creed “the Belief,” and in the

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second century, when it first appeared, almost as we have it now, it was called the Rule of Faith.

When folk inquire into Christianity, their advisers naturally want to get them studying the Bible and to lead them into personal trust in the living Christ as soon as they can, and rightly so. But as means to both ends, it helps to take them through the Creed, as both a preliminary orientation to the Bible and as a preliminary analysis of the convictions on which faith in Christ must rest.

Those convictions are Trinitarian. The Creed tells us of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that having found out about them we might find them experientially. What do we learn from the Creed as we study it? The answer has been summarized beautifully as follows:

First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world.

Secondly, in God the Son who hath redeemed me, and all mankind.

Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God.¹

When one has learned this much, one is not far from God's kingdom.

The purpose of knowledge is that we might apply it to life. This is nowhere truer than in Christianity, where true knowledge (knowledge of the true God) is precisely

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knowledge about God—applied. And knowledge about God, for application, is what is offered here, in the studies that follow.

NOTE

¹The Prayer Book Catechism.



INTRODUCTION

Weeklies for kids were well under way when I was young, and at age six or thereabouts I was devouring *Bubbles*. *Bubbles* brought me not only Dick the Boy Inventor, with his personal spaceship, and Val Fox and his Funny Pets, who every week helped Val detect crimes, but also puzzle drawings in which animals were hidden (“Can you find the elephant/lion/cat/cow in this picture?”).

From the ridiculous, now, to the sublime: I want to press the question, can you find the gospel in the Apostles’ Creed? And I want to display the Creed as, in effect, a power-point declaration of the basics of the Christian message—in other words, of the gospel itself.

Many today will react to that last sentence with skepticism. Why? Because of a habit that established itself in evangelistic circles in the twentieth century and became a mind-set among evangelicals generally. In the interests of memorable simplicity, evangelists, tract writers, youth workers, plus others boiled the gospel down to an ABC, commonly formulated as follows: (1) **a**ll have sinned and come short of the glory

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of God, you included; (2) **believe** on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved; (3) **confess** Jesus Christ as the risen Lord, and he will in due course welcome you into heaven. As twentieth-century trains and cars came to be streamlined for speed, so the gospel was streamlined for instant comprehension and response. The question being explored was: how little do we need to tell people for them to become Christians? Was this a good question to work with? In some circles, maybe so, but in most, definitely not. Let me explain.

In North America, ever since the days of the Pilgrim Fathers, a general idea of what constituted Christian belief had been warp and woof in North American culture. Just as sugar stirred into coffee is present in solution, so Christianity was continuously present in solution in North American culture right up to the twentieth century. Then, for a number of reasons, Christianity and the Bible were eliminated from public schools and universities, family prayer and Bible reading at home closed down almost everywhere, a consciously post-Christian and indeed anti-Christian outlook established itself among thought leaders, and the gospel message had to fight for entry into the minds of white people under fifty, just as it had to do in the face of the paganism of the Roman Empire in the apostolic and post-apostolic age. In such a milieu, a truncated version of the gospel message, presenting Christ the Redeemer apart from God the Creator, and remis-

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sion of sins apart from personal regeneration, and individual salvation apart from life and worship in the church, and the hope of heaven apart from the pilgrim path of holiness—which is what in practice the ABC approach does—becomes a misrepresentation, one that sows the seed of many pastoral problems down the road. Against a background of general acquaintance with, and acceptance of, the Christian outlook, periodic highlighting of a few truths to galvanize response might not in itself be a bad idea; but when we reach the point where the Creed no longer looks or sounds to Christian people like a declaration of the gospel, there is need, I believe, for some whistle-blowing and reassessment of what goes on.

For in fact the Creed itself was born as an instrument of evangelism—first, as a summary syllabus for catechetical teaching of the faith to non-Jewish inquirers, and then as a declaration of personal faith for converts to use at the time of their baptism. Jewish converts in the days of the book of Acts, for whom the issue was simply acknowledging Jesus Christ as the long-awaited Messiah, were baptized in his name immediately on professing faith and brought straight into the fellowship of the church, but the initial discipling of pagan Gentiles required much more than that. So the catechumenate came into being. It seems that every congregation of any size in the second and third centuries had its ongoing instructional classes for teaching Christianity to those who

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wished to learn it. The course usually lasted three years and always climaxed with confession of faith and solemn baptism on Easter Eve, followed by first Eucharist on Easter Day. And the confession was made in the words of the Creed.

We should note as background that in the second century, when the Creed was crystallizing throughout the Christian world, the church was constantly harassed by sheep-stealing Gnostics. Their very name made an elitist boast; to catch the proud nuance of the Greek word *gnōstikoi*, you need to render it as “those in the know.” And their Gnosticism was in fact an imaginative intellectualism that claimed to give the “real meaning” of each Christian doctrine, something that (so the Gnostics said) Christians regularly miss by reason of their mistaken idea that spirit and matter can interact to the point of uniting, and indeed have done so in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Gnostics posited two gods—a stupid and clumsy one who made all material things, including our bodies, and did not do it well and a wise and kindly one who is all spirit and is the source of our spirits currently inhabiting our bodies and who had taken steps to teach our spirits how finally to leave our bodies behind when we die and to make a beeline back to him and happiness. This is Christianity without Christ, a Hamlet-without-the-prince sort of thing. The Creed's sequence of topics, and some of its phrases, express

not only apostolic teaching but also the explicit negation of Gnostic dualism at every point.

Look, now, at the doctrinal ground that the Creed, as syllabus, required catechumens to cover and, at introductory adult level, master.

(1) *The Trinity*. It is true that no explicit three-in-one formulations of the being of God are found in surviving Christian literature until the third and fourth centuries. But it is also true that the reality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit working together as a team for the full salvation of sinners pervades the entire New Testament. It is not too much to say that the gospel, which tells of the Son coming to earth, dying to redeem us, sending the Spirit to us, and finally coming in judgment, all at the Father's will, cannot be stated at all without speaking in an implicitly trinitarian way. "I believe in God the Father . . . and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord . . . and . . . in the Holy Ghost [Spirit]" gives the Creed a trinitarian shape for all its particular affirmations.

(2) *The creation*. The Creed starts with God as Maker of everything, including ourselves. "The Father Almighty" points to God's loving care for what he has made, and to his sovereign lordship over all of it. The Gnostics, who did not believe that the God who created is the God who redeems, are already being left behind.

(3) *The Incarnation*. The Son's course of stepping down,

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or humiliation (virgin birth, crucifixion, death, and burial), followed by his step-by-step exaltation (resurrection, ascension, heavenly reign, future reign as royal judge), is spelled out in detail, for these facts are, after all, the heart of Christian faith. The virgin birth (which assumes the virginal conception, whereby the Son took flesh and became the God-man) is explicitly affirmed, and so is the reality of the Son's death. ("He descended into hell [Hades]," the place where all the departed go, is said to make the point that life left his body and he died as really, truly, and completely as you and I must expect in due course to do.) The reason for both these affirmations is not just their scripturalness and cruciality in the Christian story, but also the fact that the Gnostics made a point of denying them both.

The Gnostics negated the Incarnation as a monstrous mistake. They taught that a spirit, called the Christ, sent by the wise God to be our teacher, indwelt Jesus the man from his baptism to his final condemnation but then withdrew, leaving Jesus the man to suffer (or, as some said, to find a substitute for himself, so that he did not die). In any case, the Christ did not die, whatever may have happened to Jesus. Against this Christian teachers insisted from the start that a permanent union of divine and human took place in Mary's womb, that without diminishing his divinity the Son of God became man, died to rescue us from Satan, sin, and death,

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and now continues his incarnate life as the enthroned Lord of all and our eternal Savior-Judge.

(4) *The Holy Spirit*. The Pentecostal potentate, if we may reverently call him that, supernaturalizes believers' lives by both transforming their character into Christlikeness (so Paul and John show) and by shaping their circumstances, and their reactions to their circumstances, for kingdom advance (so Luke in Acts shows). Most of us need to catch up with what the catechumens would have been taught at this point.

(5) *The church*. Created and animated by the Holy Spirit, the church is the community of believers living through God and to God, the Father and the Son, in a sustained pattern of worship, work, and witness. (This is why the church is called "holy," which means set apart for God.) It is the worldwide people of God and body of Christ, in whose faith and fellowship social, racial, gender, age, educational, professional, and political distinctions cease to count; all are "one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). (This is why the church is called "catholic," which means comprehensive, or inclusive, in both extent and quality.) Knowing and uniting with the Lord Jesus Christ according to the gospel is the dynamic basis of the church's inner unity and togetherness. So, no doubt, catechumens were taught, in the days when the Creed was first put together.

(6) *The forgiveness of sins*. In the Creed's order of instruc-

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tion, this truth follows the account of the Holy Spirit, clearly because it is the Holy Spirit who makes us realize that sin, in its habits, acts, and guilt, is our problem and that until we get rid of its guilt we cannot have fellowship with God. Then the Spirit makes us realize that forgiveness, secured for us through Christ's atoning death, is God's free gift to us, which we receive through penitent faith (credence, consent, commitment) exercised toward Christ himself, the risen Lord. The gift is renewable; it is there to be received again and again, as often as we need it (which is, in fact, daily). And forgiveness of forsaken sins opens the door, every time, to new fellowship with our heavenly Father and with Jesus himself as our master and friend.

(7) *The Christian hope.* Gnostics anticipated disembodiment, but Christians look forward to being re-embodied, on the model of Jesus' resurrection, bodily ascension, and glorification. In the unending, unaging life with Jesus into which we shall enter, God's threefold purpose for bodies—namely, experience, enjoyment, and expression—will be fulfilled as never before.

Now I ask again: can you find the gospel in the Creed? And can you see that there is nothing in the Creed that is not part of the gospel, when fully stated? Today, on our own turf, we face pagan ignorance about God every bit as deep as that which the early church faced in the Roman Empire.

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The ABC approach is thus not full enough; the whole story of the Father's Christ-exalting plan of redeeming love, from eternity to eternity, must be told, or the radical reorientation of life for which the gospel calls will not be understood, and the required total shift from man-centeredness to God-centeredness, and more specifically from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, will not take place. All that the Creed covers needs to be grasped and taught, as an integral part of the message of the saving love of God. To help in this is the purpose of the present book.