

Session 1



THE NATURE OF CREEDS

No Christian would seriously question the fact that the Bible is the final authority for life and belief for the Christian. But the Bible is a complex document, obviously requiring interpretation, and the average reader may need help in identifying the central message of God's Word.

It is for that reason that followers of Christ have, from the beginning, created formulas to embody essential aspects of the Christian message in a succinct form. Even those who subscribe to the formula “No creed but Christ” are subscribing to a creed they did not derive from the Bible. Creedal affirmations are unavoidable.

Actually, scholars have clearly demonstrated that there are numerous creedal statements within the New Testament itself, testifying that, very early, Christians produced confessions to embody in a formalized way particular facets of the faith.

**Christianity is
“a creed to be
believed,” “a
life to be lived,”
and “an
experience to
be enjoyed.”**

—J.B. Chapman

Since Christianity is not a system of ideas but an attitude toward a certain historical person, perhaps the earliest creed was the simple statement “Jesus is Lord.” People who were acknowledged as followers of the Way were identified by confessing this truth. That it was not a superficial recitation is clear from Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (NRSV).

There are numerous other examples of more extended creedal statements in Scripture, as well as hymns that embody doctrinal truth. One of the most obvious is cited in 1 Timothy 3:16: “He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory” (NRSV). Most scholars agree that the familiar words of Paul in Philippians 2:6-11 are a quotation from an early Christian hymn and are filled with doctrinal content about Jesus from His incarnation through His exaltation.

Most creeds begin with the statement “I believe.” A proper understanding of these words in a Christian setting includes far more than an intellectual affirmation of the acceptance of certain facts. At least in an authentically Christian confession, it involves two things: (1) It means I am identifying myself with a community whose very existence depends upon the truths affirmed, and (2) it means I am affirming belief in an interpretation of reality upon which I stake my whole life and destiny and that gives meaning to my personal and corporate world. It is not an individualistic statement but a life-transforming belief—not merely head knowledge.

The Origin of the Creed

The specific origin of the Apostles’ Creed is shrouded in mystery. An exposition of the creed written in AD 404 by Tyrannius Rufinus relates a legend that enjoyed much popularity for many years. According to the tale, the apostles were preparing to go forth in the power and gifts of Pentecost to preach to the nations of the world:

As they were therefore on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled an agreed norm for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely separated as they would be, giving out different doctrines to the people they invited to believe in Christ. So they met together in one spot and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, compiled this brief token, as I have said, of their future preaching, each making the contribution he thought fit; and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to believers.¹

This tradition was later expanded to include the belief that each of the “Twelve disciples” contributed a phrase to the creed. Such an explanation was very popular and generally accepted throughout the Middle Ages. Overtime, however, this legend was demonstrated to be just a legend without foundation. Scarcely anyone today would attribute the Apostles’ Creed directly to the apostles.

Most scholars believe the creed was the result of a progressive enlargement of a simple ceremony of baptism, its structure clearly reflecting their Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19. The most immediate forerunner of the creed is generally recognized to be a baptismal confession used in the Christian church at Rome and known as “the Old Roman Symbol.”

As believers were publicly and formally inducted into the Christian faith, they were to recite the beliefs to which they were committing their lives, similar to baptismal rituals in use today in most churches.

The Purpose of a Creed

There are two major theories concerning the purpose for such a creed, the Apostles’ Creed in particular. A leading scholar of the history of Christian thought of an earlier generation, A. C. McGiffert, advanced the theory that it arose as an effort to correct the heresies propagated by a teacher named Marcion. While most contemporary scholars question this theory, some do allow for the possibility that a Marcion-like teaching was a factor in the formation of the Old Roman Symbol. At the least, it highlights the fact that much Christian doctrine was formulated in response to teachings that the Church recognized to be contrary to its major commitments.

The other theory about its intended function suggests that it was formulated for a catechetical purpose, that is, to teach new converts the heart of the faith they had embraced. One leading scholar points out the importance of this function in the light of the fact that so many new converts were swelling the ranks of the early church with no religious background from Judaism, as was true with the earliest converts. They were thus bringing their pagan ideas into the Church, and if they were not well instructed in the essentials of the faith, they could be instrumental in moving the Church away from its moorings.² One can readily see how this creed might serve a similar function in the contemporary Church when people without background in the Christian faith are brought into the fellowship of believers. Experience is not enough to keep the ship on course.

Whatever its historical origin, the Christian Church has all but unanimously agreed that this is the substance of belief upon which all Christians can agree, and most Christian congregations recite, at least at times, this creed as their confession of faith.

The Christian creed is a living response to the Person, Jesus.—Alan Richardson

The Structure of the Creed

The Apostles' Creed is divided into three "articles" corresponding to the three Persons of the Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). Most of the ancient creeds reflect this pattern. While the teaching about the Trinity is a great mystery that ultimately exceeds the capacity of the finite mind to fully comprehend, it is the most distinctive of Christian doctrines. It is not a problem added to other doctrines to make life difficult; neither is it logical nonsense. Rather, it reflects the Christian conviction that God has made himself known to humanity, and that this disclosure has a threefold aspect: He unveils himself as Father, as Son, and as Spirit, but these are all manifestations of one undivided God. David H. C. Read puts it in a simple but satisfying way: we experience God as always and everywhere (that's the Father), as there and then (that's the Son), and here and now (that's the Spirit).³

Historically, Christian thinkers have affirmed their faith that not only has the one God manifested himself in a threefold way, but He is also triune in His essential being. The basis for this faith is the confidence that the God whose essential nature is love would not reveal himself as other than He is in himself.

Scholars have entered into extremely intricate and profound discussions in an attempt to provide ways of putting the Trinitarian structure into words. Since the terms they used included highly technical vocabulary derived from various philosophies of the times, an intimate knowledge of early Greek philosophy as well as the Greek and Latin languages would be essential to following their carefully argued positions. Consequently, we may merely note a few practical implications.

First, the Trinitarian nature of God guarantees that He is accessible to human experience. If He were totally remote and had not entered into our realm through the incarnation and His Spirit, we would have no awareness of Him at all. Also, this Trinitarian nature makes possible Christian experience. Both the Son, who warrants acceptance by the Father, and the Spirit, who actualizes God's presence in human life, are essential to our relation to the Father.

It is interesting that so-called Christian movements that do not take seriously the Trinitarian nature of God do not have any vitality and eventually die. There must be some practical truth to the claim that the Trinity is essential to vital Christian experience and life.⁴

We now turn to an exposition of the creed, taking into account both the ancient teachings it clearly refutes and the meaning it may have for those of us who live in the 21st century. ●

Christians from the earliest days used creedal statements, such as 1 Tim. 3:16, Phil. 2:6-11, and Matt. 28:19.

From this Chapter...

● Re-read chapter 1. As you do, underline the key ideas. After thinking about concepts, select two of the key ideas and write in a journal or notebook an

explanation of them in words a 10-year-old can understand.

● 1 Timothy 3:16 is one of the biblical creedal statements. Read that statement several times, highlighting different words. Listen to the Word with your heart. Consider your personal response to the message.

● The next time you sit down for a meal with family or friends, put a copy of the Apostles' Creed at each plate. Use it as a table grace. Three different people could read one of the paragraphs, or articles, of the creed. Wouldn't it be great if your mealtime conversation was about the core of the Christian faith instead of celebrities, the weather, or politics? ●