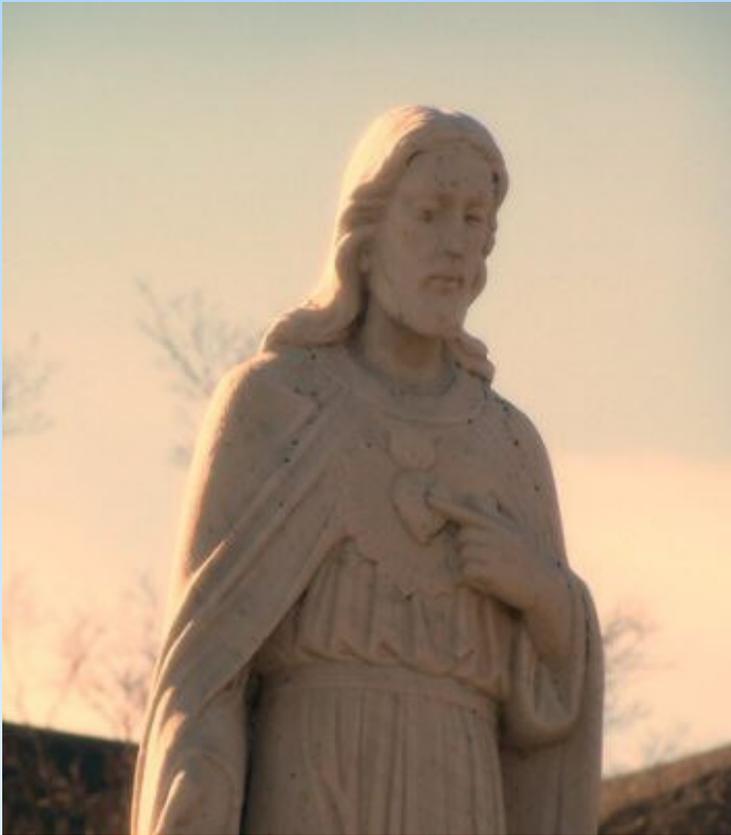


The Creeds: Why Do We Need Creeds?

By David Bennett



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If you are a non-Christian, or from certain Christian traditions, including Baptist or Pentecostal, you might find yourself asking, "so, what exactly is a creed?" Perhaps you know what a creed is, but you find the idea of a creed too formal, too limiting, and stifling, as do many progressive Christians. However, a creed is simply a statement of belief, derived from the Latin word *credo*, to believe.

Before coming down too hard on creeds, understand that *everyone has a creed*, as does every church or group. Even if a group of persons says, "we don't believe in creeds," it obviously does have a creed...its creed is "we don't believe in creeds!" Thus, if one has the capacity to believe, one has a creed, even if this creed is unspoken or unnamed. In fact, one reason many people like creeds is because they accurately explain the cherished beliefs of individuals and groups of people. Some churches, valuing common belief, but wary of the term "creed," have "statements of belief" that often are longer and more complicated than the ancient Christian creeds.

Creeds are meant to define the boundaries within which a group of people operate. While a creed is a "rule" in one sense of the word, it is more accurately a metaphorical boundary-line or fence, dividing the safe (or correct) areas from the unsafe (or incorrect). This is why many creeds summarize only the

basic points of belief, because as fences they do not spell out all truth as much as they define the lines one should not cross. Also, creeds, namely the Christian creeds, put into words the experiences of communities. The Christian creeds summarize the basic beliefs and practices that historically have determined if one is an orthodox, or correct believing, Christian. The Church has held certain beliefs to be indispensable since its inception. The apostles, and their successors, did not consider everyone claiming the label "Christian" to actually be Christian. In fact, many New Testament epistles were written because some individuals held incorrect beliefs about Jesus.

So, can one not believe the creeds and still be Christian? Well, yes and no. Not every Christian believes every line of the creed everyday of his life. We all have natural doubts, questions, and days, if not years, when we doubt the validity of our beliefs. Yet, we must still faithfully try to work through our doubt, and during times of doubt, it is crucial to recognize that despite our personal doubts, the Church will continue to believe the creeds, because they best describe her experiences and beliefs. Thus, even though we may have private personal doubts, we are discouraged from preaching or teaching against the creeds. Why? For one, it is egotistical to insist that our personal doubts should reshape the beliefs of the whole Church, whose character and history embrace millions of people, and almost 2000 years of existence. Also, the creeds are time-tested, and have survived the intellectual and theological fads of all generations.

You may ask, "what about people who say the creeds, even saying 'I believe,' when they don't really believe what they are saying?" Well, the major Christian creeds are open to a degree of interpretation (e.g. Catholic and Orthodox disagree about the text of the Nicene Creed about the Holy Spirit), however reciting a creed simply because it sounds dignified, everyone else is doing

it, or because it is a grand historical document, is contrary to the purpose of a creed. It is playing fast and loose with the creeds to view them this way: The far more genuine action would be to simply not recite the creed if you don't believe what you are saying, rather than doing interpretational acrobatics.

By now you may be thinking that creeds are the property of Catholics, but this is not true. All types of Christians, including Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and even many Baptists, accept the major creeds of Christianity, the Apostle's Creed and Nicene Creed. Thus, the basic beliefs of the major Christian creeds transcend denominations and are a possible starting point for future unity. We must note that while the creeds are important, to be Catholic, one must hold to everything the Church teaches, not just what is in the major creeds. From a Catholic perspective, the creeds, said during worship and before confirmation and baptism, constitute an important part of the Faith, but they are only part of the whole picture. However, the beliefs contained in the creeds may be a good starting point for ecumenical relations (even if limited) with other groups. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, in many mainline churches (even in some Catholic churches), the creeds are simply past historical documents that many clergy and laity do not actually believe, which lessens the potential ecumenical effect of the creeds.

In conclusion, in our present age creeds seem to be making a comeback, even in denominations that have previously balked at them, primarily because many now see that everybody has a creed, even those who have said for years "we have no creed." Many younger Christians are discovering their Christian heritage, preferring to be connected to a larger and older reality than just our recent era. For years, many clergy and scholars in the modern period told Christians to reject the ancient creeds because they were "outdated" and "irrelevant." Many

postmodern men and women are instead rejecting this modernist mindset, and discovering the ancient creeds, which connect us to present and past believers, and provide an authoritative boundary between correct and incorrect belief, a line that is becoming more and more blurred in the wider secular culture.

Questions for Further Reflection:

1. If someone asked me what it is I believe about Jesus, what would I tell him?
2. If someone asked me what my church or group believes about Jesus, what would I tell him?
3. How important is it that my personal beliefs line up with my church's beliefs?
4. Why is it important that Christians set boundaries of belief?
5. What other organizations or entities to which you belong have creeds or codes of belief?

Appendix: The Major Christian Creeds

The Apostles Creed

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living 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.

Amen.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,

maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
one in Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
By the power of the Holy Spirit,
He was born of the Virgin Mary
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in fulfillment of the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,

he has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Athanasian Creed:

Whosoever will be saved,

before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith.

Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled,
without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And the Catholic Faith is this:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity,
neither confounding the Persons,
nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father,
another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the
Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate,

the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible,
and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles,

nor three uncreated,
but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.
So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty,
and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three
Almighties, but one Almighty.
So the Father is God, the Son is God,
and the Holy Ghost is God.
And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord,
and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.
For like as we are compelled
by the Christian verity to acknowledge
every Person by himself to be both God and Lord,
So are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion to say,
There be three Gods, or three Lords.
The Father is made of none, neither created, nor begotten.
The Son is of the Father alone,
not made, nor created, but begotten.
The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son,
neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons;
one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.
And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other;
none is greater, or less than another; But the whole three Persons
are co-eternal together and co-equal.
So that in all things, as is aforesaid,

the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.
He therefore that will be saved is must think thus of the Trinity.
Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also
believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess,
that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;
God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds;
and Man of the substance of his Mother, born in the world;
Perfect God and perfect Man,
of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the
Father, as touching his manhood;
Who, although he be God and Man,
yet he is not two, but one Christ;
One, not by conversion of the Godhead
into flesh but by taking of the Manhood into God;
One altogether; not by confusion of Substance,
but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul
and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ;
Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell,
rose again the third day from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
he sitteth at the right hand of the Father,
God Almighty, from whence he will come
to judge the quick and the dead.
At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies

and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life

everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully,

he cannot be saved.

For many Christians, the idea of reciting or believing in creeds seems foreign, or even “unbiblical.” This booklet explains the purpose behind creeds, why even non-creedal Christians actually have creeds, and why creeds are becoming popular among many denominations that previously swore them off.

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