

# Introduction: “I Believe”

## EARLY CREEDS

The word “creed” comes from the Latin verb *credo*, the first word of the creed, which is translated into English as “I believe.” Essentially, then, a creed is a collection of doctrines or beliefs that a religious order or denomination holds as distinctive.

### Israelite Creedal Expressions

From the very beginning the redeemed of the LORD found it necessary and helpful to clarify their beliefs in the world. After all, when Abraham made sacrifices in the land of Canaan, they would have appeared very much like the sacrifices of the Canaanites, or Babylonians, or other religious groups. So he had to make sure every one knew which God he was worshiping. So in Genesis 12:1-9, we have the report of the beginning of his creedal worship. He made an altar to Yahweh. The first duty was to name the God being worshiped. And then the text says that “he proclaimed the name of Yahweh” at the altar. He publicly declared the nature, the person and the works of this God Yahweh. The clue to what he said is found in Exodus 34 where the exact same expression is used of Yahweh’s activity of proclaiming his name to Moses—a long list of attributes. This list became part of the ritual faith of Israel because it is repeated so frequently in the Bible. As time went on the worshipers would add to the name and to the attributes great works that God had done, such as “Creator of heaven and earth,” or “the one who delivered me from all my enemies.”

The nation of Israel was then instructed by the LORD at various times concerning their use of statements of belief to be used in conjunction with worship. Deuteronomy 26 is perhaps the clearest example of this; in this chapter the Israelites were told what to say when they offered the first fruits to the LORD. Their words expressed their own personal faith and their part in the heritage of the faith.

Many other creedal statements were used at the Temple over the centuries, but perhaps the most important was the famous “*Shema*” (“Hear”) of Deuteronomy 6:6. It says, “Hear, O Israel. Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.” There are other possible translations, but this one captures the idea well. It was a statement of faith in the sovereignty of Yahweh—He alone is the true and living God. The rest of the passage reports how important such a statement of faith was to the people.

In time expressions from the Law and the Prophets were used in the worship services of the Temple and later the Synagogue. Later prayer books recorded the most frequently used of these. But in the biblical period, the Book of Psalms provided most of the creedal statements and benedictions because it was the prayer book of the Temple.

## Early Christian Creedal Statements

More importantly for our study is a brief survey of fragments of creeds and confessions of faith found in the New Testament, suggesting that the early Christians found it necessary to summarize their distinctive beliefs. The basic pattern of these early statements is concerned with two things: (1) the naming of Jesus, who lived and died and rose again in history, and (2) the ascription of a title or titles to him, marking his divinity. Here are some of the fragments that the early church used:

“Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mk. 8:29; 14:61; 15:2)

“Jesus is the Son of God” (John 1:34; 1 John 4:15; Acts 9:20; Heb. 4:14)

“Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11)

These confessions in time were enlarged to include the resurrection, as well as the divine nature of Jesus, the Christ, who was with the Father in the beginning and became the mediator between God and people. The most extensive one is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3b-7, the summary of the Gospel, the essence of the Christian faith:

“That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then to more than five hundred brethren at one time . . . then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles” etc.

Other condensed versions of creeds may be found in Romans 1:3-5a, 8:34, and 1 Timothy 3:16. In fact, some of the creeds were preserved in the early hymns of the Church, such as in John 1:1-18, Colossians 1:15-20, and Philippians 2:6-11. 1 Timothy 3:16 will serve as a good example:

“And by a common confession, great is the mystery of godliness;

God was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit,

was seen of angels, proclaimed in the world, taken up to glory.”

These confessions of faith by the early Church served several purposes: (1) they became the center of the teaching of the Church, the essential doctrine; (2) they formed the basis of the Gospel, the proclamation to be made to the world; (3) they provided new converts with the proper things to say at the time of baptism; and (4) they provided worshipers with a nucleus of expressions for their liturgy.

But the important point that comes out of a study of the Old and New Testament about creeds is that **they were formed out of necessity**. The new community of worshipers of Christ found it necessary to formulate what they believed in common when they were confronted by old religions, false teachings, and established heresies. The early Church was confronted and attacked on every point but held onto the belief in the person and work of Jesus the Christ by these fixed formulas.

## THE NICENE CREED

The creed that is used in services with holy communion today is the Nicene Creed. There are many creeds that could be studied to gain a survey of Christian doctrine, but this one is both fairly complete and still concise. The creed was composed at a Church council at Nicaea in 325 A.D. Nicaea was located just south of Constantinople (today, Istanbul), and a little inland, in what today is Turkey.

It is helpful to understand why this council ever came about in order to appreciate the doctrines it includes. At the risk of oversimplifying it, we can say that a man named Arius, an elder under the Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, began teaching that Jesus was a being who had been created by God before time and then was himself the agent of creation. His teaching made Jesus less than God, and more than man, somewhere between the two, but fully neither. This, in sum, came to be known as Arianism. The teaching spread throughout the world quickly, sparking a lot of controversy. And so the emperor Constantine called a council of some 300 bishops to assemble in Nicaea and settle the matter. This council was significant in that it was the beginning of the functioning of the catholic (universal) Church. It had never been so visible as an organized entity before. The bishops were considered to be the Church, and since there was a worldwide gathering of the bishops, this represented the assembled Church.

At the council the creed of Arius was promptly and soundly rejected. Bishop Eusebius offered a creed that he had been using, but it was too general--the Arians were willing to adopt it. Then Athanasius, a deacon from Alexandria and a champion of the orthodox view, presented his creed which stressed the oneness of Christ with the Father. The new creed was adopted, and a condemnation was made on anyone not accepting it (now the Church was using power that formerly they had seen in the Roman

government used against them). Constantine himself chaired the meeting, interrupting whenever he wished, and directing the choices. But it is probable that he knew very little doctrine, and certainly did not conform very well. Later in his life he seems to have come more to understand and accept the truth.

## THE NATURE OF BELIEF AND BELIEFS

### The Church as a Believing Community

It is the central teaching of the Bible that the Church is a community of believers, individuals who have come to faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul asserts, “For by grace are you saved **through faith**, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). This is clearly based on the teaching of Jesus, who in the night explained to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whosoever believes in Him** shall not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). It is simply not possible to please God without faith.

And this principle of faith has been at the heart of the ancient Israelite community as well, so that by the time the early Church began to formulate the doctrines they could see the unity and the continuity of the faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures. The cardinal passage in the Old Testament is Genesis 15:6 (I say “cardinal” because Paul quotes it twice to establish justification by faith). Genesis 15 says, “Now he [Abram] believed in Yahweh, and He [Yahweh] reckoned it to him for righteousness.” The Hebrew word “believed” is related to our familiar Hebrew word, “Amen.” The verb means “to be reliable, dependable, firm.” In the verbal conjugation that means “believe,” the basic idea is to consider something dependable and therefore count on it, or, act on it. When Abram believed in Yahweh’s word, he left Ur of the Chaldees to become a great nation in the land of Canaan. If he had never left, he would not have been counted a believer, no matter how much he considered to be true in the call from God. And this is the point Hebrews 11 makes of all the greats of the faith: by faith they did what they did. Or, as James puts it, their faith was evidenced by their works.

The principle of faith should not be hard for us to grasp, for almost everything we do requires some faith. When we get up in the morning, we turn on the light switch, believing that it will work. We turn on the water, believing that water will come out of the lines. We start our cars, believing that by the switch of the key it will all work. Our faith in these things is based on two things: the reliability of the things we trust, and our experience that has proven them reliable over and over again. If, however, we have a car that is ready for the junk heap, our faith in it will not be very high. If it has failed

us time and time again, we will not have much confidence when we turn the key. The same principle works with people. If you are looking for a person to repair something in the house, you have to hire someone that you trust. If that person says that he has never actually done this kind of work, but has always been fascinated by it, your confidence will drop dramatically. Now in the realm of religion we see the principle of faith is similar, just on a higher level, for the stakes are higher. Our faith will only be as strong as the object of our faith; and we will only feel confident if we have proven him again and again.

Abram believed in Yahweh, and Yahweh credited him with righteousness. That Abram was credited with righteousness for his faith shows that his faith was saving faith. It was a faith that responded to the revelation of the word of God in obedience. And throughout the Bible true faith is similarly described as obedience to divine revelation.

### **Belief as Commitment to the Truth**

Now, we must understand what we mean by the word believe. There is a major difference between the way we use the word “believe” in general discussions and the way we use it in theological discussions (where “trust” might serve us better). If I accept the trustworthiness of the biblical and historical accounts, I might say that I believe that Jesus lived, taught, and did many wonderful things. But this takes no commitment on my part, and so is not what the Church means by faith that is credited with righteousness. Knowledge may compel the assent of the intellect, but it does not compel the act of the will to trust. So when I say “I believe” when saying the creed, that is not meant to say, “I have sufficient data to support these ideas as valid and viable philosophical tenets.” No, it says much more; it says that these are the truths from God that I have believed in, that I have committed my life to, that I have made the center of my life and the basis of my hope.

We have to think a little more about this kind of faith so we are clear. We cannot dissociate knowledge from faith, for we have to know the word of God and the claims of Christ found in that revelation in order to believe. We do not scorn knowledge, for that would make faith a subjective experience without solid content; the Church is built on the truth of divine revelation (the word of God), reason (the use of the intellect in studying and knowing the truth), and tradition (the ideas and writings of the greats of the faith who have gone before). But when we use the words “I believe,” we are using the language of faith and not certainty (in the sense of verifiable data). We can have assurance and certainty based on the reliability of the word of God, the witness of the Holy Spirit, the shared experience of the Church in its pilgrim journey, and on supporting evidence and experience. But we do not have the certainty of seeing fully-that will come in the presence of God in glory.

## THE CONTENT OF BELIEF

The Reformers had to deal with this question of faith because it was such a critical issue in their day. Justification is indeed by faith and not by works--but what does that faith involve, what does it include? They went to great lengths to show that saving faith including the clear **understanding** of the doctrines to be believed, the **assent** to the truthfulness of those doctrines, and then the **commitment** to them. Thus, saving faith was not a general belief, a hoping against hope; and it was not merely the assent to the truthfulness of the things being taught, for even the fallen angels and Satan believe this way, and tremble (James 2:19). Saving faith is present when the message has been properly apprehended, assented to, and appropriated as the basis of one's relationship with God. Saving faith then is characterized by a life that is committed to living out the truth of the faith.

So what is the content of the faith? Well, that will be the focus of the survey of these meditations on the creed, for the doctrines that the creed contains express the essence of the Christian faith. This kind of creed is the full explanation of the Christian Gospel. Scripture itself says that we must believe the Gospel to find eternal salvation; and the description of the Gospel is that Christ died according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures. But the key in this statement is "according to the Scriptures." It is not sufficient to believe that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. We have to believe these facts as explained by Scripture. This will require us to determine who Christ is (why did his death redeem), how he is related to the Father and the Spirit, what kind of death it was, why the death was necessary (sin), why he was buried, what the resurrection revealed, as well as what all this does for us when we accept it by faith. In other words, the simple Gospel formula assumes a good number of biblical doctrines--and these were included in the creed because the Gospel cannot be properly understood without them.

But knowing only the creed is inadequate. The creed is meant to be a summation of what Scripture says on the various doctrines. To summary revelation we use a creed; to understand the creed we have to know revelation, the word of God. So in this series of studies we will not simply define doctrines, but we shall look at various key passages that give us a full picture of what these brief expressions say. But we will have to be brief, for there is so much available. We could, after all, use up all our time, and more, on just one of these expressions in the creed. The plan, however, will be to define the doctrine briefly and then look at a passage that with teaches it or clarifies what it means.