

The Creed: What We Believe and Why It Matters

2. What the Creed is and What It Does

**Sunday, January 23, 2005
10 to 10:50 am, in the Parlor.**

Everyone is welcome!

God our Creator, who in the beginning commanded the light to shine out of darkness: we pray that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ may dispel the darkness of ignorance and unbelief, shine into the hearts of all your people, and reveal the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

- Common Prayer, p. 385

THE CREED



WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE
AND WHY IT MATTERS

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and Why It
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Introduction

Introduction

The Countercultural Act

- In reciting the Creed each Sunday:
 - *In an age that avoids commitment...* we commit ourselves personally, and as a community, to a set of convictions.
 - *In a culture that rewards novelty and creativity...* we use words written more than 1600 years ago.
 - *In a society where accepted wisdom changes by the minute...* we proclaim ageless truths so critical that we must repeat them week after week.

Introduction

Origin and Development: Conclusion from Last Session

- **“The creed does not appear suddenly in history as an imposition from on high. It has been there from the first moments of self-definition, from the first impulse to articulate experience, from the first effort to defend against distortion, from the first attempt to summarize the story by which this new thing in the world claimed at once to be the people of the one God, yet touched more profoundly and intimately by God than humans had ever before imagined, in the flesh of Jesus, in the Spirit of the risen Lord.” (p. 39)**

What the Creed Is and What it Does

What the Creed Is

Four Terms

- Four terms used to describe what the Creed is:
 - 1. A **Profession** of Faith
 - 2. A **Rule** of Faith
 - 3. A **Definition** of Faith
 - 4. A **Symbol** of Faith

A Profession of Faith

A Profession of Faith

A Statement of Commitment

- A Profession of (= a Confession of, or a Bearing Witness to) Faith:

The Creed is a statement of personal and communal commitment.

A Profession of Faith

Faith, Belief, Religious Truth

- Some questions to ponder:
 - What is religious **faith**?
 - What is religious **belief**? Is it the same as faith?
 - How does belief in **religious truths** differ from belief in **scientific truths**?

A Profession of Faith

What is Faith?

- **Faith** embraces *the entire human response to God*.
- It includes:
 - Belief (= the cognitive dimension of faith)
 - Trust
 - Obedience
 - Endurance
 - Loyalty

A Profession of Faith

What is Belief?

- **Belief** is only the *cognitive* dimension of faith.
- **Belief** is not however a trivial aspect of faith, for belief is both:
 - (1) The condition for having **faith**.
 - (2) The beginning of **faith**.

A Profession of Faith

What is Belief?

■ Example:

- (1) *Belief is the condition for having faith:* We must first believe in God before we can ever respond to God in trust and obedience.
- (2) *Belief is the beginning of faith:* **Belief in the existence of God is already an act by which one “entrusts” oneself to a world that is not entirely defined by what can be seen and counted, heard, and accounted for. (p. 45)**

A Profession of Faith

Religious Truth vs. Scientific Truths

- Science seeks truths that can be discovered and verified by objective measurement and analysis.
- Faith deals with realities:
 - that cannot be measured or verified in the way scientific truths are.
 - that demand personal commitment.
- Faith is thus personal and subjective.
 - It is described in terms of commitment, confession, and bearing witness.

A Profession of Faith

Religious Truth vs. Scientific Truths

- Ways of testing the truths of faith:
 - Is it consistent and cogent?
 - Does it match Scripture?
 - What sort of life does it aid and support?
- Such methods however pale beside the rigorous measurement and analysis that establishes scientific fact.

A Profession of Faith

A Modest Profession

- Our profession of the religious truths of the Creed must be modest, for we must acknowledge that:
 - We do not *fully* understand the truths we proclaim.
 - We cannot demonstrate or verify the truths even to our own satisfaction.
 - Many others cannot affirm the truths we proclaim.

A Profession of Faith

A Modest Profession

- We must, like Luther (1483-1546), admit:
“Here I stand, God help me, I can do no other,” and profess = confess = bear witness to our personal commitment to an Ultimate Reality that lies beyond scientific measurement, analysis, and verification

A Profession of Faith

A Communal Profession

- Our profession is also communal; we say “**We believe.**” This has three implications:
 - 1. We are declaring we are the community defined by the words of the Creed.
 - 2. We acknowledge each of us believes and understands the words of the Creed in different ways, levels of intensity, and degrees of integrity.
 - 3. We acknowledge that no one of us individually believes as much, or as well, as the community combined.

A Rule of Faith

A Rule of Faith

A Measure of Christian Identity

- A Rule of Faith:

The Creed provides a “ruler” to *measure* Christian identity, in particular:

1. a *measure* to guide interpretation of our defining sacred scriptures,
2. a *measure* to help judge what is a Christian lifestyle

A Rule of Faith

A Measure or Ruler

- **Rule of Faith.** Latin: *Regula Fidei*
 - *regula*: Latin translation of Greek *kanon*, meaning “a measure” or “ruler.”
 - Same term is used to describe the definitive collection of Christian writings: the Canon.

A Rule of Faith

A Measure for Reading Scripture

- The Creed provides a code, a “ruler” or measure for the proper reading of Scripture.
- The Scriptures are full of obscurity and conflicting views, open to illuminating interpretations as well as distortions.
 - Satan can quote Scripture to support his own ends (Matt 4:1-11)

A Rule of Faith

A Measure for Reading Scripture

- Example: Marcion of Sinope (d. 160 A.D.) effectively quoted Scripture to support his view that:
 - There were two Gods, one evil, one good.
 - The God of the Old Testament, the Creator, had made an evil world of matter.
 - Jesus, the previously unknown good God, calls us to abandon the evil material world and cultivate the spirit through fasting and celibacy.
- A “creed” by Marcion that provided a “code” for the “proper” interpretation of Scripture caused the early Church to realize it needed to provide its own Creed.

A Rule of Faith

A Measure for Reading Scripture

- Even denominations that do not profess a creed implicitly accept much of the “code” of the Creed for interpreting Scripture.

A Rule of Faith

A Measure for Christian Living

- The Creed as the Rule of Faith provides a standard for Christian Life.
- People tend to act in accordance to their convictions about the world.
 - For example, if we believe God created the world, then our lives should reflect that conviction with Thanksgiving, with a reverence for matter and the world, and with a desire to share the fruits of the creation.
 - **“the perception of existence as a gift given moment by moment by an unseen power generates in us a sense of awe and wonder, of receptivity and thanksgiving.”** (p. 61)

A Rule of Faith

A Measure for Christian Living

- By establishing the “right belief” (**orthodoxy**), the Creed helps us recognize the “right practice” (**orthopraxy**)

A Definition of Faith

A Definition of Faith

The Boundaries of Belief

- **A Definition of Faith:**

The Creed provides the boundaries of Christian belief and therefore of the Christian Community

A Definition of Faith

The Boundaries of Belief

- To “define:” to draw a line around something, setting limits around something.
- To say “Jesus is the Christ (= the Messiah),” and “Jesus is LORD,” means it is Jesus, and not someone else.

A Definition of Faith

The Boundaries of Belief

- The development of the Creed involved making more explicit and more “definite” affirmations so to exclude some ideas as “outside the boundaries” of Christianity.
- *Example:* Arius (250-336 A.D.) declared Jesus was made by God, a creature, and not God.
 - The Creed was then refined to say Jesus was “one in being” with the Father, and “begotten, not made.”

A Definition of Faith

The Boundaries of Belief

- Being a Christian means affirming certain truths, giving allegiance to a certain vision of reality, and rejecting some ideas and some visions of reality that others might say to be true.
- To be a Christian thus means we must be *controversial*. We cannot agree with everyone about everything.

A Definition of Faith

Caveats on Boundaries

- Defining boundaries does not in any way prevent or exhausts a richness and diversity of Christian life and belief.
- The Creed does not “define” God or God’s work in the world:
 - God is not an object we can define.
 - What we know about God is through God’s self-disclosure in and through history.

A Symbol of Faith

A Symbol of Faith

A Description of Ultimate Reality

- A Symbol of Faith:

The Creed provides:

- a symbolic description of Ultimate Reality
- a symbol or token of the faith of the Christian Community proclaiming the truth of that Ultimate Reality

A Symbol of Faith

The Problem of Religious Language

- How can human language express truth about realities beyond our direct experience, beyond our ability to test and proof?
 - “Mythic language” = language used to express a truth beyond our ability of test or prove.
 - Word “Myth” here does *not* imply a fiction
- How can human language ever adequately express a truth about God?

A Symbol of Faith

The Problem of Religious Language

- Example from Paul 2 Cor. 5:19. **“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”** Can human language adequately explain the Ultimate Reality pointed to in the words:
 - **“God”**
 - **“in Christ”**
 - God **“reconciling the world to himself.”**

A Symbol of Faith

Speaking “Positively” and “Negatively”

- To respect the “distance” between human language and the Ultimate Reality that language is trying to express when we speak religiously, theologians suggest we must speak both “positively” and “negatively.”

A Symbol of Faith

Speaking “Positively” and “Negatively”

- *Positive* speaking about God (as if God were a character in the world): “affirmative” or “**kataphatic**.”
- *Negative* speaking about God (God’s absolute otherness demands silence rather than description): “negative” or “**apophatic**”

A Symbol of Faith

Speaking “Positively” and “Negatively”

- Example:
 - *Positive speaking*: God is the “maker” of the world.
 - *Negative speaking*: God is not the “maker” of heaven and earth in any manner known to us.

A Symbol of Faith

Analogy

- We combine both “positive” and “negative” ways of speaking when we use **analogy**.
 - In analogy, two things are both alike and unlike.
- God is a “maker” *like* the human craftsman. But God is also *not* a “maker” like any human craftsman, for God “makes” in a matter beyond all human comprehension.
- **Analogy** provides us with a *partial* sense of the truth, even if in the strictest sense we don’t know what we are talking about.

A Symbol of Faith

Critical Theological Concepts

- The language of the Creed can also be thought of as a set of “critical theological concepts.”
- **Critical Theological Concepts** = concepts we cannot explain or even define, but whose *denial* leads to loss or distortion of other truths

A Symbol of Faith

Critical Theological Concepts

- Example: God is the “maker of all things” is an example of a **critical theological concept**, for:
 - We cannot prove or adequately define it.
 - But if we deny it:
 - We lose truths about the nature of the world and our relationship to the world.
 - If the world is not made by God, then it can become our plaything to use or abuse as we please rather than a gift received in gratitude and awe.

A Symbol of Faith

Summary

- **“The creed can be understood as a symbol of faith because through analogy it speaks truly about God — truly but inadequately — and, as a set of critical theological concepts, its statements provide the logic for the Christian way of life.” (p. 57)**