

Why Creeds?

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[0 : 00] Why creeds? Why creeds? I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, and so on. Thus begins the most famous creed of the Christian church, the Apostles' Creed. It wasn't written by the apostles. It was a production of the early church.

It was probably used in the context of admitting new members into a church as a statement of what these new Christians had come to believe. A few weeks ago, I announced to a certain person outside this church that we were going to begin a new series of studies into the Apostles' Creed. She looked down her nose at me, and she said, I don't need creeds. All I need is my Bible. I don't need creeds. All I need is my Bible. Now, I was a bit taken aback since this person had been raised in the free church, which is defined by our adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith, an expanded 17th century creed, but also by the sheer arrogance with which she said it.

But what she said is fairly reflective of a broad swathe of Christians today, especially from the evangelical tradition, who view creeds with suspicion as being Roman Catholic and replacing Scripture as the ultimate authority. I don't need creeds. I just need my Bible. Now, I didn't have the wit to respond to this person then and there. I'm not a very quick thinker. But over the last few weeks, I've thought about why it is that in our church, both here in Crow Road, as a denomination, the Free Church of Scotland, and as the church universal, we resolutely believe in creeds and confessions of faith. We do not place them on the same level as the authority of the Bible, for after all, only the Bible is inspired directly by God. But nevertheless, we believe that properly used, they play a vital role in the spiritual health of the church, and that as individual Christians, they'll help us to grow as Christians and to worship God in the way He wants us to. After all, we are to worship Him not just in spirit, but also in truth.

There are at least seven reasons why creeds are important and why, therefore, we intend to spend the next few Sunday evenings working our way through the Apostles' Creed. Creeds are biblical, traditional, unifying, discerning, responsive, missional, and God-glorifying.

[3 : 19] And I'll go through them briefly this evening. Creeds, first of all, are biblical. Creeds don't have to be long. In fact, the creeds of the Bible tend to be rather short. Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4, is one of the first creeds which all believers were to believe and to profess as their faith. Deuteronomy 6, verse 4, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, the Shema.

That's a creed. That's a confession of faith. We read another confession of faith, another creed in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 3 and 4. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.

He was buried, he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. Again, this is a statement of truth that every Christian everywhere always is required to believe.

And the Bible contains many of these so-called creeds, these statements of faith. Another is in Philippians 2, verses 6 to 11, the famous Carmen Christi, which declares what every Christian everywhere is to believe concerning the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, something to be held on to, but made himself nothing and so on. Another, Colossians 1, verses 15 through 20, which concerns the supremacy and the preeminence of Christ. This is what we are to believe.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, and so on. The Bible is full of creedal statements which every faithful Christian is to hold as the confession of their faith. When asked, who do you believe Jesus is? We are to reply, I believe He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, and so on. And when asked, what is the meaning of the mission of Christ? We are to reply, I believe that He died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.

[5 : 51] You see, these creedal statements are a summary of the Bible's teaching. That person who said she didn't need creeds because she has the Bible doesn't realize that her Bible contains

countless creeds.

Sometimes I'll say to my wife, Kathmer, have you seen my spectacles anywhere? Only for her to say, they're on top of your head. It's the same when it comes to creeds. The Bible is full of them. They are summaries of what we are to believe concerning us Christians. Second, creeds are traditional, traditional. Now, tradition is somewhat of a taboo word in the evangelical church. On one hand, it conjures up images of dying churches unwilling to change.

On the other hand, it's unfortunately linked with Roman Catholic churches' dependence upon Scripture and tradition as being the foundations upon which they ground their faith.

But at its most basic level, tradition, far from being a bad word, is a very biblical and helpful thing. It is not to be avoided. It is to be embraced.

[7 : 14] Behind my mother's next-door neighbor's house was a small mound of earth which seemed to serve no purpose. My mother's next-door neighbors decided to hire a small digger to remove that mound of earth.

Over the next few weeks, their garden was flooded and a small stream began to flow down the road. You see, they hadn't realized that this small mound of earth really was serving a purpose. It was diverting an underground stream away from their property. In the same way, the historic creeds of the Christian church, which seemed to serve no purpose today, really are very important indeed. The American Christian scholar Jaroslav Pelikan, who specialized in the early Christian church and was a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church, once wrote these words. They're wonderful, wonderful words.

If you're writing notes tonight, you need to write this down and seed it into your memory. He said, Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition. So, tradition, as we've seen tonight from Heidelberg, is the living faith of Athanasius and Augustine, of Luther and Calvin, of Knox and of Rutherford. They're all dead, but the creeds they wrote represent their living faith. They wrote these creeds and confessions of faith as summaries of what they believed and what we are to believe concerning Christianity. The word tradition literally means that which has been handed down. That which has been handed down. We can paraphrase 1 Corinthians 15 verse 3 in this way, I handed down to you as of first importance that which was already handed down to me.

[9 : 38] The Greek word there I delivered is the word *paradosis*. It's the equivalent of tradition. Our traditions are the central elements of our faith as Christians, those things handed down to us as of first importance. Move them, get rid of them, and we risk being flooded with all kinds of false teaching. Besides which, how incredibly arrogant a thing it is to presume that we know better than those great Christians of the past, and we don't need to hear what they tell us. It may be a taboo word, but bring on tradition. We want to be the most traditional church in Glasgow if it means doggedly and resolutely holding on to the truths of first importance, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He rose again on the third day, and so on.

Creeds are traditional. Third, creeds are unifying. Creeds are unifying. One of the complaints often raised against creeds is that they are divisive. They divide people. The opposite is true.

Take for example the Nicene Creed, carefully composed in 325 A.D. by bishops from all over the Christian church. It is a summary of the church's teaching, or Scripture's teaching rather, on the nature of Christ.

You wonder what the Nicene Creed is. At Christmas time, we sing some of its most important lines. When in the hymn, O come all ye faithful, we sing, God of God, light of light, lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb. Very God, begotten, not created. Lines lifted straight from the Nicene Creed.

There is nothing in those lines which should cause division among Christians, because not to hold to the teaching of the creed on the nature of Christ is simply not to be a Christian. Yes, they are divisive in that they separate out Christian teaching from false teaching. More about that in a moment.

[12 : 02] But among Christians, there is nothing about the creeds of the early church which should form any kind of division at all. In fact, the opposite is the case. The creeds form the central truths around which every Christian everywhere, in every age, and in every place can gather and say, this is the confession of our faith. This is what we believe. We may disagree about many things, but we agree about these central truths.

Creeds unite us together as we stand and publicly profess that we believe these things. So, I watch you professing these things as the confession of your faith, and you watch me as I profess these things as the confession of my faith, and a bond develops between us.

You believe that Jesus Christ is God of God, and so do I. I believe that Jesus Christ was begotten, not created, and so do you. It's a message of our unity around the fundamental dignity and glory of the Son of God, how glorious Jesus really is. We may not be in the same denomination.

We may have different views on many things, but on this we are one, and the oneness we experience as together we profess the truths of the early Christian creeds overcomes everything that divides us.

The creeds are unifying. Fourth, creeds are discerning, discerning. One of the most important functions of the creeds is that they are responses. They're all responses to false teaching. Let's go back to the Nicene Creed, 325 AD, modern-day Turkey. It's largely written to combat the false teaching of a powerful group in the early church called the Aryans or the Arians. Arians didn't believe that Jesus was of the same substance as God. They only believed He was of a similar substance to God. Their modern equivalents are the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons and perhaps even Muslims. Aryan teaching was highly pervasive in the early church. And so this council of bishops met in Nicaea in modern Turkey and formulated the Nicene

[14:46] Creed. So the Nicene Creed defines the orthodox biblical position on the essence and nature of Jesus as the Son of God, being of the same substance of God, God of God, light of light, very God. I said this before Christmas, but if after the service you go home and you bring up on YouTube the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, singing the Christmas song, O Come All Ye Faithful, you'll find that they exclude the verse which includes these fundamental creedal statements about the nature of Christ as divine. They exclude it.

That's what makes the Mormons un-Christian heretical and dangerous. Because if you're wrong about Jesus, you're wrong about the most important truth of the Christian faith, and you are not a Christian.

Most every creed was developed in response to a pervasive false teaching in the church. The Chalcedonian Creed of 451 AD went deeper into what it meant for God to become incarnate of the Virgin Mary, how Jesus could be said to be two natures in one person, what theologians today call the hypostatic union. It was drawn up to counter the false teachings of a group of men called the Eutychians. Their modern equivalents are found in the Monophysite churches of the Coptic churches of the East. Drawing on the teaching of the Bible and of the great early church fathers, Chalcedon stated once and forever that Christ is both truly God and truly man.

These are the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy beyond which we dare not stray. Now, you might think to yourself, irrelevant, of what relevance is this to us? The truth is, the nature and essence of Christ is of first importance to us as Christians because the entire nature of the atonement, the sufficiency of the cross rests entirely on a right understanding of who it was who died for us there on the tree. If we hold to orthodox Christian biblical teaching as summarized in the Creed, then we can have the complete assurance that all our sins have been forgiven. If we do not, then we'll always feel as if somehow our good works also are necessary to salvation.

So, the creeds are safeguards against false teaching which can so easily creep in and defile us.

Fifth, we're getting there, creeds are responsive. Creeds are responsive. The word creed is taken from the Latin word credo, which means, I believe, I believe. To publicly recite a creed is to make a public statement of one's faith. We're saying, this is what I believe.

[18:22] In a society where, let's face it, our public figures will not tell us what they privately believe, to publicly profess a creed as a Christian is a powerful image. It is announcing to the world, this is what I believe to be of true and central importance to my life.

But even more than that, our creeds are our response to who God says He is and what God has done for us. One of the earliest, but perhaps the most powerful Christian creed in existence is that proclaimed by the apostle Peter. In Matthew 16 verse 16, when in response to Jesus' question, who do you say I am? He replied, I believe, credo, you are the Christ.

Over the course of months and years of his being Jesus' disciple, Peter had seen and heard many things which had convinced him of who Jesus was and what He had come to do. So, the first Christian creed, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God, was a direct response to who Jesus is and what Jesus was doing. In the same way, our public confession of faith is a response to all God has done for us in Christ Jesus. He has saved us by His blood shed on the

cross, and we say, credo, I believe in the forgiveness of sins. He conquered death and rose on the third day, and we say, credo, I believe in the resurrection of the body and of the life eternal. Creeds are our heartfelt, public, courageous responses to who God is and what God has done. As such, they aren't just words we recite. They are the devotions of our hearts.

We repeat them with hearts filled with gratitude and praise because the Jesus, whose mysterious being and His majestic glory is described to us in such detail, gave Himself for us.

[20 : 50] Sixth, creeds are missional. They are missional. There has, in recent years, developed a rather unhelpful dichotomy between those who are passionate about mission and those who are passionate about doctrine or theology.

I've heard it put in these terms by a serving free church minister. I'm not telling you who it is. I don't need to know theology.

Just let me preach the gospel. I don't need to know theology. Just let me preach the gospel. It sounds good until you peel back the layer of what He said and you quickly realize just how dangerous and dumb a thing it is to say that.

Without theology, there ain't no gospel to preach. And without mission, the gospel we love will never be proclaimed.

The fundamental truth is that without creeds and the theology to contain, there is no gospel to preach. Let's think of the most basic statement of the gospel.

[22 : 04] Jesus died for our sins. Jesus died for our sins. Tell me, who is the Jesus who died for our sins if it's not the Jesus whose essence and substance is hammered out on Nicaea and Chalcedon's anvils?

What makes the Jesus who died for our sins any better than the Jesus of the Mormons? And what does it mean that He died?

Does that refer merely to physical death as we understand it? Or does the death of Christ also defer to the spiritual death He endured on the cross as His Father punished Him on account of our sins? How can we understand this word died without reference to that line in the Apostles' Creed, I believe in the forgiveness of sins? What does the word for mean in the context of Jesus died for our sins?

This is the language of substitutionary atonement. In what sense did Jesus die for me? Did He die as an example to be followed or as the completed sacrifice whose blood is sufficient to take away all my sins and to confer upon me His imputed righteousness?

[23 : 28] Again, Nicaea and the later confessions of the church summarize the Bible's teaching on the nature of substitution. Who is the hour?

Jesus died for our. Who is the hour for whom He died? This is the language of biblical anthropology. Are we merely weak and in need of doing a little bit better in life?

Are we basically good and need that good awakened in us so that we may be like God? Or are we fundamentally divided from God by His infinite holiness and purity compared to our total depravity and impurity?

Are we dead in our transgressions and sins or are we not? And then what are these sins for which Jesus died? Is sin really that serious a thing that it should cost the life of Jesus upon the cross? And does the blood of Jesus cover every sin, past, present, and future? Next time you hear someone say, I don't need theology. I just want to preach the gospel.

[24 : 40] Ask yourself, ask yourself, whether you'd be comfortable going to a doctor who says, I don't need to know much about medicine.

I just want to help people. Remember, if you're walking up Crow Road and someone says to you, as they probably won't, but supposing it does happen, they say to you, what does the Bible teach? You are hardly likely to begin at Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 and read your way through the whole Bible there and then. You're going to condense and summarize the message of the gospel. And that's what creeds do. And that's why they're missional. Lastly, you'll be glad to hear. Last point, creeds are God-glorifying.

Creeds are God-glorifying. Our friend Terry Johnson, senior pastor at IPC Savannah, has written a helpful book called *The Identity and Attributes of God*.

[25 : 42] He spends the first chapter of the book defending the study of God and his attributes from the kind of Christians who are anti-creedal. This first chapter helpfully describes why not only should we take the great creeds and confessions of the historic church seriously, but why we

should spend time ourselves in the study of God and his attributes.

Let me give you a couple of quotes from the brilliant chapter. Knowing God, he writes, knowing God is the all-encompassing, all-determining factor in understanding who we are and the purpose of our existence.

The creeds helpfully summarize for us the teaching of the Bible on who God is so that we may know him better and in so doing, know ourselves better.

But then Terry writes something which I'd heard nowhere else, but when you think about it, it makes sense. He writes, Right thinking about God is in and of itself glorifying to God.

Right thinking about God is in and of itself glorifying to God. If someone is asked to describe me and they say, Oh, Colin.

[27 : 10] Oh, yeah, I know Colin Dow really well. He is short, dark, and fat. He is an extrovert. He is single.

And he's from the Philippines. They clearly don't know me very well and are doing me a disservice. To think wrong thoughts about God is not to know him as he is.

To know him as he is gives him glory and praise. The historic creeds, which are summaries of the Bible's teaching on the nature and the character of God, are God-glorifying in that ultimately they provide us with right thinking about God so that we can know him as he really is.

Let's take an example. Let's go back to Nicaea. 325 A.D., nearly 1700 years ago. In its discussion on the Holy Spirit, Nicaea declares, We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. Summarizing Orthodox biblical teaching on the essence of the Holy Spirit, the Nicene Creed reminds us the Spirit is the Lord. He is the Giver of life. And that with the Father and the Son, He is to be worshipped and He is to be glorified.

[28 : 35] To think that way about the Holy Spirit, the blessed third person of the Trinity, gives Him glory. But whatever spiritual life any one of us has comes from the Holy Spirit.

And therefore, He deserves our worship and our praise. The Holy Spirit is not a force as He is for modern-day Arians like the JW's or the Mormons.

He is not the totality of God as sometimes He seems to be for some charismatics. The Holy Spirit is not an it, an object. He is a He, a person, with all the dignity and honor belonging to both Father and Son.

Some weeks ago, someone said to me, I don't need creeds. I just need my Bible.

Well, it sounds awful pious, does it not? It really sounds very pious indeed. But behind it, however, hides a world of ignorance and arrogance.

[29 : 39] Balanced Christian thinking comes from taking the historic creeds seriously and using them wisely. Viewing them not as supplanting the Bible, but summarizing the Bible.

Not supplanting the Bible, but summarizing the Bible. That is why when we stand together and profess the words of the Apostles' Creed, I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, we're engaging in the most courageous and joyful of exercises.

But lastly, let me ask whether we really believe and rejoice in the truths of the creeds. The problem is, even Satan, the devil, knows that the creeds are true, but he takes no joy in them.

But if this evening we have placed our faith and trust in Jesus, the Jesus who is very God, very God, truly God, and truly man, and are living for Him, they fill us with joy and confidence that no matter what this world tells us and no matter what this world does to us, we know the truth.

And you know what Jesus said? The truth shall set you free. Amen. May God bless His Word.