

What is the Creed, and why is it important?

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[0 : 00] What is the creed and why is it important? And I'm going to tackle three questions regarding that title.

First question, simple answer to the inquiry, what is the creed? And the second question, again, an answer to the inquiry already stated, why is it important?

And the third question, can we do without it? A question that will take me perhaps 30 seconds to answer right at the end of my presentation.

But now we begin at the beginning. Question, what is the creed? We are Anglicans, so we are going to give an answer to that, an Anglican answer to that question.

And here it is in Article 8 of the 39. And just a moment, while I turn it up, I want to read it.

[1 : 21] You may, of course, know it by heart, but then again, you may not. Article 6, which talks about the place, the sufficiency of scripture for salvation, is an article which most Anglicans get to know in the course of their Christian lives.

But Article 8, headed of the three creeds, is a less familiar one. However, let's go to it. From Article 8, we shall learn that a creed is a consensus document, which does three things.

It focuses the Christian faith. It functions as a foundation for Christian fellowship. And in its Anglican form, at any rate, it forms a pack of three.

That's in the title of the three creeds. And this is the text. The three creeds, Nicene's Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed, for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.

Now, these three documents had better be identified straight away. The Nicene Creed is actually a creed that came to be in two stages.

[3 : 14] The first version was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325, and it was worked over again, reformulated, into the Nicene Creed as we know it, at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Both these councils were called by the Roman Emperor for the time being, with the same purpose, that is, to achieve religious unity in the Roman Empire.

And the problem was the same in both cases. Have you ever heard of Arianism? You shall in a moment.

Arianism is a false view about the Lord Jesus Christ, that he is top creature, but he's not the Son of God.

And in its first stage as a Christian Empire, the Roman Empire was deeply split over that issue.

[4 : 34] Arius, as a matter of fact, was a late second century presbyter in the church at Alexandria, but he became extremely popular, for a reason which I'll tell you in a minute, and the Roman Christians split over the claim he was making.

And the Nicene Creed, I think, is put first in the list by the 39 articles, not only because it was defined first, which it was, but also because the issue with which it deals centrally is the most fundamental of all the issues with which the creeds deal.

Namely, who and what is our Lord Jesus Christ? We'll come back to that in a moment. Let me next tell you that Athanasius' Creed, which comes second in Article 8, was not composed by Athanasius. Athanasius was a fourth century theologian who had a good deal, I may say, to do with the Creed of Nicaea in both its forms, but the Athanasius Creed, as it's called, dates from the 5th or the 6th century, quite a long time after, and it's called the Athanasian Creed because it does express very fully and clearly the doctrine about our Lord Jesus Christ, which Athanasius had fought for during the whole of his working life.

That actually means from the days when the Nicene Creed was put together, 320s, right up to the time when the Creed of Constantinople, as the second version actually ought to be called, because

the council was held at Constantinople, and all through the period, the half century, between the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople, well, Athanasius was fighting for what is agreed now to be essential Christian orthodoxy, and he got into a great deal of trouble, I may say, for doing so, because a number of Roman emperors during that half century thought that Arianism was the version of Christianity to embrace, rather than, now I use the word, which we're familiar with, rather than Trinitarianism.

[7 : 56] And so Athanasius, who was made a bishop at quite a young age, was from time to time bumped out of his episcopate, because the government was against him.

But anyway, that's where Athanasius comes into the story, and the creed, the second creed in Article 8's list, is called the Athanasian creed in a gesture of respect to him.

It's his doctrine. And then after that, Article 8 speaks of that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed. Creed. That's the creed that we say in morning and evening prayer, and that's the creed that you may have expected to be listed first.

But actually, as I'll say again more fully in a moment, it didn't begin life as a creed. It began life as a syllabus for catechesis.

Catechesis. You probably know that Packer is making a big deal of catechesis these days. Well, that's how the Apostles' Creed began.

[9 : 22] Towards the end of the second century, the syllabus was put together. But it didn't become a creed recognized by any church as its creed until the seventh century.

at which time it was accepted by the Church of Rome as its own church creed. Well, that's what the three documents are.

And between them, they constitute a group which is normally referred to as the Catholic Creed in its three forms or the three Catholic creeds which are accepted by the whole of historic Christianity.

That, of course, is a general statement. The whole of historic Christianity means, when you break it down, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the classic Reformational Protestant churches of which the Church of England is one.

So that's what they are. All right. Now, what are we going to say about them? Well, let me go back over the story connected with each and tell it a little more fully so that you will get the point of each of the three documents.

[11 : 07] The Nicene Creed to start with, the one which was improved at the Council of Constantinople and so is often called the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed with a hyphen between those two nouns and of which both versions were put together at councils of bishops from all over the Christian world, councils summoned by the emperor to do a particular job which the emperor specified for them.

that is, to agree on a version of Christianity on which the whole of the empire could agree. Well, as I said, the issue was the question of who and what was our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ, we who say the Nicene Creed, as we call it, regularly at communion services, are used to saying we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

That word of one substance, or rather that phrase of one substance, translates a Greek word which Athanasius, who was part of the Council of Nicaea, as we've said, a word which Athanasius came up with as the word which ought to be central in the statement of faith that the Council of Nicaea made, because it expresses the precise point of issue between Arianism and Christian Orthodoxy. What was that point of issue? It was the plurality of God. That is, that here you have two persons, one God, but each of them a distinct person, each of them as fully divine as the other.

[13 : 51] That was what the word was affirming, this word homoousios. That's the word which is translated, as I said, of one substance with the father.

And that was the precise issue that had to be settled. Let me go back a bit now.

Arius, this Alexandrian presbyter who caused all the trouble, thought he had a classic simplification to offer the Christian church.

He said, in effect, look, for a hundred years and more, yes, nearly, nearer two hundred, we have been struggling to find a way of expressing what we believe about the Lord Jesus, God, and to hold on to the unity of God, the oneness of God, the fact that there is only one God, to hold on to that as we do so.

So, various ideas have been tried. The idea, for instance, that Jesus was the one God in a different form, as in some movies, the late great Peter Sellers appeared in more than one form, playing different characters.

[15:38] But most of the church was aware that that wouldn't do. However, it's an idea that was going the rounds, and what Arius had to say was, I have a better idea than that.

My idea, which I think fits everything in the Bible, that's what he said, is that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, is top creature.

The first creature to be formed by God, a creature in a class by himself, though very soon Arians were saying, and the Holy Spirit is in the same class.

So that there are two top creatures, not just one. And God made the two top creatures in order that they might be his agents in making everything else.

That's Arianism. So we worship Jesus as top creature, rather than as God in any shape or form, rather than as the Son of God, whatever that phrase might mean.

[17:12] And this is the simplification, said Arius, that we all of us have stood in need of, and here I am offering it to you.

This is what we should all believe. Well, Athanasius, who was a clear-headed young man, battled with Arius and those who supported him, on two grounds.

One is that if Jesus is a creature, then he ought not to be worshipped, because that's idolatry.

And the second thought was, if the Lord Jesus is a creature, well, he doesn't have the life of God in him, in the way that the Father does, and that means that he cannot communicate the life of God to us who put faith in him.

You can't give what you haven't got. Arius never apparently saw the force of that point, but Athanasius laid tremendous emphasis on it, and of course he was right to do so.

[18:39] And he countered Arius by introducing this word, homoousios, of the same substance as the Father, to express the thought of what we call co-equal divinity.

The Father and the Son, both of them divine in the same sense. God, and yet there's only one God. There are two persons within, a unity which the Creed expresses, this is the language of the 16th century English now, Creed expresses it in the phrase, being of one substance with the Father, Father.

And most modern versions of the Creed, as devised by people who go in for prayer book revision all around the Anglican world, most modern versions of the Nicene Creed render the word one in being with the Father.

substance, because the word substance, as we all of us know, of course, in this 21st century conveys to people's minds only the notion of solid stuff of some kind, like rice pudding, shall I say. well, this was the issue, this was the battle that Athanasius spent his life fighting, and at the Council of Constantinople, what he had argued for was accepted, and it's been accepted by the whole church in all its forms ever since.

[20:45] One being, one divine being, God in the singular, but within the unity of that divine being, two persons, actually three persons, at the Council of Constantinople, a section was inserted, which hadn't been there in the Nicene formula, a section that is on the Holy Spirit, making it plain that the Holy Spirit comes in the same category as the Father and the Son, three co-equal persons within the unity of the one God.

And this is what the church ever since has called Trinitarianism, the threeness of the one God. well, that's all that I'm going to say at this moment about the Nicene Creed, but you can see what the Nicene Creed does in effect is to define Christianity, because if the Lord Jesus is not a divine Savior, well, Christian faith is exploded.

Now, the Athanasian Creed, so-called, confirms all of that. It's a teaching document, which defines the Trinity, and then, for good measure, the Incarnation, in a very exact way.

the document itself is a lumbering item in English, and whereas the 1662 prayer book, and indeed going back the 1549 and 52 prayer books that Cranmer put together, whereas the 16th and 17th century prayer book specifies 14 Sundays in the year when the Athanasian Creed should be recited in place of the Nicene Creed in the communion service, our 1662 Canadian revision of the prayer book doesn't specify any single day, on which the Athanasian Creed must be said, and that's simply recognizing that it isn't a document really suitable for use in worship services, and if at your leisure you read it, it's in the prayer book still, you will appreciate why not.

As I say, it's a lumbering document, it's a laborious document, it's a didactic document, and it doesn't catch the spirit of worship at all well.

[24 : 11] So, that's all that I think I need say about that. Perhaps here I should insert a word or two about the trinity.

Yes, the trinity is part of the heritage of Christian understanding that all Christendom has received ever since the fourth century, but it has always proved a problem to teach, in fact.

And, I say straight away, there isn't a good way of teaching it because it's a reality for which there is no parallel.

And realities for which there's no parallel are very difficult to express in words and equally difficult to illustrate.

We're used, I suppose, to the Sunday school illustrations. A teacher will tell the class, well, the trinity is like water.

[25 : 25] It has three forms, liquid, steam, and ice. And then there's another illustration which was very widely used in England.

I don't know whether it's so widely used over here, but again, this is Sunday school stuff. you know how the clover leaf is. There are three little clover leaves, as it were, bound together on a single stalk.

That's how God is. One clover leaf, three clover leaves, three in one. You can see, I'm sure, what's wrong with both those illustrations.

Neither of them makes the point that here we are talking about three persons. Each of them depersonalizes God in a way which really means, I think, that the kids in Sunday school lose more than they gain by being presented with that illustration.

It encourages them to think of God as a thing, rather than as three persons, to each of whom one should be relating.

[26 : 41] when I have to teach the Trinity, I offer a couple of different illustrations which try to do justice to the thought that there are three persons here.

One of them is the illustration of a family. family. Now, I know that three persons related in a family, whoever they are, are three distinct persons, and not in any sense one person, but they are one family.

So, think of the three persons as related in the unchanging way that folk are related in family.

A father is always father in relation to sons and daughters. There's a pattern there which doesn't change.

And so it goes on with other family relationships. The relationship remains the same. And that's what I'm trying to illustrate by using that illustration, which a number of theologians these days are working with, because they think it's the best illustration that's available to us.

[28 : 14] My other illustration is purely Packer, and it may simply be second rate. I'm not sure. But think in terms of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as a team.

A team in the same sense that in hockey or in soccer, the eleven players form a team.

Now, how do you define the team? Well, each player is related to ten others in a way which remains the same whatever's going on in the game.

The goalkeeper is always a goalie. And the forwards and the backs, they're related to each other.

They are supposed to mark each other and keep together in a pattern whatever is happening in the game as the ball goes up and down.

[29 : 22] puck if it's hockey you're thinking of. And in the way, in the revelation of God that you have in the New Testament, well, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they're always related to each other in the same way.

And that, I believe, is the best, how can I say, the best concept to work with when we are thinking about God and the way that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are working for the fulfilment of the Father's plan.

The Father always does what he does through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus, our divine Savior, always does what he does.

On the one hand, in obedience to the Father's direction, he made it very plain when he was on earth that everything that he said and did was in obedience to the Father's direction, and at the same time, now that he's gone from this world, he works through the Holy Spirit doing everything that he does in our human lives.

So, there you have a constant relational pattern, and you identify each of the three persons by stating how he, let's say, he for the moment, of course, of God, is genderless.

[31 : 10] Everything that's involved in masculinity and femininity is involved in God's being, but God isn't one as distinct from the other. No, but everything that, as I say, God does in this world is done by this three-fold pattern of action, which is a pattern of togetherness, as you can see, and explains what is meant by talking about one God.

And, to my mind, this is the most helpful of the illustrations that's available. If you don't agree, never mind. It's only a Packer illustration, and I've never heard it used by anyone else.

But, anyway, what we can agree on, even if we don't attach much weight to any of the illustrations, is that here you have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons who yet are one God, and there is at least one scripture that makes that perfectly explicit.

No room for doubt. word. That's Jesus' words recorded right at the end of Matthew's Gospel, when he's giving the church, well, the apostles, and through the apostles, the church, their marching orders, which, of course, are our marching orders, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them, he says, in the name.

Now, name is singularly. Not in the names, but in the name. So this is one name. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, three persons, one name.

[33 : 13] And, well, that's a foundation, that's a foundational scripture. As I say, of all the scriptures that refer to the three persons together, it seems to me the clearest and solidest in the sense of being foundational.

And that's the Lord's directive. Every disciple is to be baptized, and baptized in that three-fold or triune name.

So, there we have the Trinity given. And now, after all of that, what about the Apostles' Creed? Well, as I said, the Apostles' Creed began as a syllabus.

A syllabus used in catechetical classes for teaching Christianity to inquirers. And the syllabus was formed, we know, in the second century AD.

and the items in the Apostles' Creed are topical headings for instruction in the class.

[34 : 31] I believe it's God the Father Almighty. That would be the theme of one class, at least. A maker of heaven and earth, that might be a second class, or it might be included in the first class.

we don't know about that. And in Jesus Christ is only Son our Lord. Next class. And then details about Christ, because after all Christianity centers on Christ.

You mustn't wonder that in the Creed more detail is given about the Lord Jesus Christ than about either the Father or the Holy Spirit, because that's the way it is.

a conception conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, miraculous entry then into this world.

Then the Creed goes straight to the cross, because after all the cross is central in the Gospel. And on from the cross to the resurrection, the third day he rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven.

[35 : 46] One would hope that in view of its intrinsic importance, they would have given a whole class to the ascension. We tend not to do that.

We tend not to appreciate the importance of the ascension. And that's another drum that Packer beats when he has a moment free from beating the catechesis drum.

But yes, ascension sits at the right hand of the Father, so now we understand what's going on in the world, now that Jesus is gone, from the Father's right hand, that is the place of delegated authority, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, of whom the Lord Jesus spoke very fully, you remember, in his farewell discourse to his disciples, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father's will continues to be worked out.

And, well, all of this is material which was specified to be taught and required to be understood when people inquired about becoming Christians.

And, that has only to be said, I think, for us to appreciate it. And, the set of topics for instruction, as I say, that became firm, unsettled, and in due course was turned into a form of words, which those who had been catechized and prepared for baptism, that is, for public Christian commitment, they were required to recite it prior to their baptism.

[37 : 54] I mean, prior to the point where they were put under water in whatever way they were put under water. And, I use that form of words because they may have been totally immersed, and

water may have been poured over their head, and the truth is, we just don't know, and it's very possible that both methods were used in different parts of the Christian world, or even as alternates, in the same part of the Christian world.

We don't know. Whatever Baptists may say, and whatever Presbyterians may say, we don't know. All right, so we don't.

But we do know that those who were to be baptized were at a certain stage, perhaps third century, certainly fourth century, and thereafter, they were required to say the creed.

What do you believe? I believe, and so forth. And then in the seventh century, as I said, the Church of Rome took on the Apostles' Creed as its, we would call it, domestic creed.

This is the creed of our church. All right, this is my attempt to fill in the background of the three creeds, so that you understand what they're doing as a set, what their purpose is as a group, and what is the orthodoxy, I use this latter-day word, the orthodoxy that they are all concerned to preserve.

[39 : 50] Trinity and incarnation, that's what Christianity is all about in terms of its frame, and it's only in terms of that frame that we can tell the story of the Son of God becoming man, coming to earth to die on the cross for our redemption.

Okay, now I move on to my second question. Why is all this important? Well, here is a string of seven things which the creed does for us, seven specifics regarding which the creeds crystallize the appropriate content, function, seven jobs, in other words, that the creed does.

Begin at the beginning. One, the creed identifies the Christian God. Well, from what I've said already, you see my meaning there, and I need not say anything more about it.

we need both the notions of trinity and incarnation to define the Christian God.

The creed, in each of its three forms, gives us all three. Second, the creed specifies the Christian facts.

[41 : 34] That is, the facts without which Christianity could not exist. The existence of God, incarnation of the Son, cross, resurrection, ascension, and something that I didn't mention, but perhaps should have done, the prospect of the Savior's return, and reconstruction of the entire cosmos.

For that's part of the gospel message as well. And indeed, that's the third thing that I'm going to say. The creeds define the Christian gospel for us.

The good news of salvation and new life. Various people have, around the age, shall I say, of historic Christianity, have offered various views about what is really the heart of the gospel, and the views have diverged.

But we've got the matter defined for us centrally, clearly, in the three creeds. There you have the Christian gospel, the message about how sins can be forgiven and eternal life become ours.

It's all in the creed. And this leads on to point four. in this way, the creeds interpret the Christian scripture, at least in a fundamental way, by telling us what is important in the New Testament in particular, where the gospel is spelled out, and that, after all, is something which, when you stand back and think about it, we all of us need, because there is so much different stuff, of all kinds, in scripture itself, putting the Old and the New Testament together, and a guide to what's basic, primary, in this collection of material, is a great help, quite obviously.

[44 : 02] And that leads on to item five. The creeds thus shape Christian practice, that is, response, in faith and action, to the key facts concerning Christ.

And that in itself leads on to the unity of Christian people, the creeds unify the Orthodox, and the creeds focus Christian worship, and they focus the Christian future as well.

They tell us, in other words, what the Christian hope is, the hope that God has promised, return of Christ, new heaven and new earth, new bodies for us, and a new form of spiritual life, whereby we are forever with the Lord, we see him, each of us personally, this is just mind blowing, but it's scriptural, each of us personally is in fellowship with him, with the Lord Jesus, and for each of us, I think we can guarantee, it will be as if we were the only persons to whom the Lord Jesus is giving his attention and ministry.

it's been said, I think it was Augustine who said that God loves us, each of us, as if each of us was the only person in the world needing to be loved.

God. And what I'm saying now is that it's part of the Christian hope that each of us will be the object of the Savior's love, care, and attention, as if we were the only Christian to whom he was concerned

to minister.

[46 : 21] And that's a thought that blows, well, my mind, and I think all thoughtful Christian minds as well. But it's a wonderful thought, glorious thought, joyful thought, and there it is.

The creeds point us to the life everlasting, which the New Testament expounds is in that way. So, these are the jobs, the simple, basic jobs, that the creed begins, at any rate, to do for us.

But each, in relation to each of them, the creed sets our feet on the right path. And if we are going to be, shall I say, good and faithful Christians, well, we shall continue in that path, and we should, I think, thank God for the creeds which focus the faith in this way, so that we can tell straight away when the question is raised, which the right path is.

Now, granted, a lot of us, day by day, living our Christian lives, aren't in situations where we're constantly being challenged by Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons, or exponents of some other, dare I say, freaky doctrine.

And so, the value of the creeds in doing this job isn't appreciated so vividly as it was in the early Christian centuries when the Roman Empire was being weaned away from any number of freaky sects, really freaky, and the authority, the truth of the Christian message was being established by active argumentative effort.

[48 : 42] But that's the job that the creeds have done very fruitfully in the past, and which they can do fruitfully again, as necessary.

So now we get to my third question, which I can answer very briefly. Can we do without the creeds? As many of us, in fact, do?

Well, the true answer, I think, is yes, but not really well. To have the creeds clear in our minds, and to have their doctrine, shall I say, under our belt, because we've been taught it, and the creeds constantly remind us of it, that makes us far, far stronger as witnesses for Christ in this world, and as folk seeking to make sense of the things that happen to us in ordinary, everyday life.

These are the basic truths by which Christians live. To be clear on that, to have them in one's mind, is very much to our advantage.

Not to be clear on them, not to have them crystallized, focused for us, is to be very much at a disadvantage.

[50 : 14] And I am, as I think you know, a professed evangelical, and so I think are you, and we evangelicals have reason to be anxious again and again, that all the sermons we hear, and all the classes we take, and the teaching we get, and the books that we write for each other, they all focus on the grand scale, on the glories of the redeemed life, and they don't focus in the same way on the Trinity and the Incarnation, which means that when Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons come knocking at the door, they are much clearer on what they have to say to us than we are on what we ought to be saying to them.

Well, I would like to see that situation adjusted. I would like us to be as happy in our evangelical identity, saying, I stand for biblical, sorry, I stand for creedal Christianity, as we already are saying, I stand for biblical Christianity.

It isn't just that the two are one, it is that the creeds are a great help to basic Christian understanding, basic Christian godliness, basic Christian worship, basic Christian fellowship with the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit, and indeed, in certain respects, with the Holy Spirit too.

So that was what I wanted to say to you in answer to the question I was set, what is the creed, why is it important, moment, and my monologue is now finished, and we can discuss.

All I want to say now is, do remember, this is mainstream Christianity that I've been presenting to you.

[52 : 42] Mainstream, nothing eccentric about it, it's a cure for eccentricity, and I may have presented it in an eccentric way, that's another issue, but the stuff itself is mainstream.

So, brothers and sisters, let us resolve to stand for creedal Christianity, and let us make sure that we're in a position to explain what we're doing, and what we're believing, if we're asked.

I know turning up texts in scripture is basic, but being able to quote the Creed often can help very much. All right, Packer ends and you begin.

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