



Creedal Theology as a Blueprint for Discipleship and Leadership A Time-Tested Criterion for Equipping New Believers and Developing Indigenous Leaders

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► G. W. Bromiley.
“Creed.” *Elwell’s
Evangelical Dictionary
Software*, 1998-99.

“Creed” derives from the Latin *credo*, “I believe.” The form is active, denoting not just a body of beliefs but confession of faith. This faith is trust: not “I believe that” (though this is included) but “I believe in.” It is also individual; creeds may take the plural form of “we believe,” but the term itself comes from the first person singular of the Latin: “I believe.”

I. What is the Biblical Basis for Creedal Theology?

A. Creeds in the technical sense are not present in the Bible, but creeds do mean to express essential biblical data and truth.

B. Creedal forms in Scripture.

1. The Shema of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6.4-9.

2. Little credo in Deuteronomy 26.5-9.

(Deuteronomy 26.5, NKJV) “And you shall answer and say before the Lord your God: `My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. [26.6] `But the Egyptians mistreated us, afflicted us, and laid hard bondage on us. [26.7] `Then we cried out to the Lord God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and looked on our affliction and our labor and our oppression. [26.8] `So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. [26.9] `He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, ”a land flowing with milk and honey.”

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3. New Testament references and occurrences to creedal material.
 - a. Sources of creedal material.
 - (1) Traditions, 2 Thessalonians 2.15.
 - (2) Word of the Lord, Galatians 6.6.
 - (3) Preaching (Romans 16.25) in the technical sense are not present in the Bible, but creeds do mean to express essential biblical data and truth.
 - b. Baptismal creedal confessions, Acts 8.37; Matthew 28.19; Romans 10.9-10.
 - c. The Christological confession, Philippians 2.5-11.

II. What is the Instructional Basis for Creedal Theology?

- A. Serves as a **syllabus for catechetical teaching** in Christian belief and doctrine in order to ground new believers in the faith.
 1. Creed allows for variation (from “simple exposition to advanced theological presentation”).
 2. E.g., from recitation of the Creed itself to the treatment of Langdon Gilkey’s systematic theology based on the Creed (cf. the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century).
 3. Sources show that candidates for baptism had to display some understanding of the profession they made in baptism (i.e., demanded intellectual comprehension as well as sincere heart commitment).
- B. Serves as a **basis for doctrinal and theological education** for the Christian community at large, regardless of level of maturity.
 1. Creeds forged out of theological controversy, the rise of heresies, and the need to protect the apostolic confession from admixture with falsehood.
 2. The ministry of heresies: enabled early Christian pastors to expand their first rough confessions into more developed formulas.

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3. Examples of creedal defense.
 - a. “Maker of heaven and earth”: probably to fight Gnostic idea of separation of the True God from creator.
 - b. Teaching on the Virgin birth and Jesus’ death: combats Gnostic claims against Jesus’ authentic human nature
 - c. The Arian idea of Jesus as less than divine added to affirm Christ’s absolute divinity.
 4. Creed slowly grew to function as both a proper understanding of the Scriptural story as well as test of the orthodoxy of the clergy.
- C. Serves as an important ingredient of the worship (liturgy) of the community of believers (teaching in and through our worship).
1. Confession of faith, in song and sermon, is an essential part of all true Christian worship.
 2. Nicene Creed was incorporated in the Eucharistic sequence (i.e., the Lord’s Supper service), first in the East, then in Spain, and finally in Rome.
 3. Often was placed after the reading of the Scripture as a congregational response of faith to the Word of God.

III. What Creeds Have Been Recognized as Prominent and Significant in the Church?

- A. In Christian history, three creeds have taken superior place: The Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.
 1. The Apostles Creed.

(Traditional English Version). I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN.

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- a. Supposedly written by the apostles under inspiration, and therefore came to be called the Apostles' Symbol or Creed (Synod of Milan, 390 A.C.E.)
- b. Lorenzo Valla refuted the apostolic origin (which the East never accepted).
- c. Scholars attribute its origin to the Old Roman Creed (expounded by Rufinius in 404).
- d. Present form originates from the 8th century, and has been made of regular use in the West, especially by the Reformers in liturgies, confessions, and catechisms.

2. The Nicene Creed.

*We believe in one God,
The Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth
and of all things visible and invisible.*

*We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Begotten Son of God,
Begotten of the Father before all ages,
God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God,
Begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father,
through whom all things were made.*

*Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became human.
Who for us too, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, 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 and life-giver,
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
Who together with the Father and Son is worshiped and glorified.
Who spoke by the prophets.*

We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sin,
and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.
Amen.*

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- a. Despite its name, it should be distinguished from the creed of Nicea (325), has been debated whether it was recognized at Constantinople I (381), but was recognized by Chalcedon council in 451, and at Constantinople II in 553.
- b. The West has added the one Latin clause called the “filioque clause” (i.e., and from the Son) as to the statement on the Holy Spirit, but the East never conceded the orthodoxy of the original drafts.
- c. This is the undisputed primary confession of the Church in both the East and West; it is the primary Creed used in Eucharistic and catechetical contexts.
- d. A concise, elegant, and beautiful statement of what the earliest pastors, theologians, and leaders of the Church considered to be the elemental essentials of Christian orthodoxy.
- e. TUMI’s most critical test of historic orthodoxy: fidelity to the teachings of the Nicene Creed.

Note- The word “catholic” as used in the creed means “universal.” It is significant because it reminds believers that there are many congregations but only one Church. No congregation is an end in itself, rather it is organically connected to the whole Church and must understand itself to be in unity with other believers both locally and around the world.

► Terry Cornett, “What is the Nicene Creed?” in **T2-105 Christian Theology: God the Holy Spirit**. The Urban Ministry Institute, 1997.

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What is the Nicene Creed?

The original Nicene creed came out the first worldwide gathering of Christian leaders at Nicaea in Bithynia (what is now Isnik, Turkey) in the year 325. It was called to deal with a heresy called Arianism which denied that Jesus was God and taught that he was instead the greatest created being. The council at Nicaea hammered out language that bishops could use to teach their churches who Jesus was.

A little over 50 years later new challenges were being faced. A modified form of the Arian heresy was making a comeback. And a new problem had also emerged. Some bishops and pastors had begun teaching that the Holy Spirit was not God (was not of the same substance as the Father) and was not really even a creature. He was thought of as a kind of power but not as a person of the Godhead.

To resolve this problem, a council of 150 bishops of the Eastern Church were gathered in 381 at Constantinople (modern day Istanbul, Turkey). This council reaffirmed the fact that Jesus was fully God and then turned their attention to the question of the Holy Spirit which the Nicene council had left untouched (the original Nicene Creed read simply, “We believe in the Holy Spirit.”). The council turned this simple statement into a paragraph which explained more fully the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

This expanded version of the original Nicene creed is what is most commonly known as “The Nicene Creed” today, (although it is more technically correct to call it the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed” or the “Creed of the 150 Fathers”) It is universally acknowledged by Christians of all denominations¹. And it is used as a part of the worship service in many traditions, as well.

3. The Athanasian Creed.

(Early Fifth Century) Whoever wills to be in a state of salvation, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [apostolic/universal] faith, which except everyone shall have kept whole and undefiled without doubt he will perish eternally. Now the catholic faith is 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, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One, the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit; the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated; the father infinite, the Son infinite, and the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet not three eternal but one eternal, as also not three infinities, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one infinite. So, likewise, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty; and yet not three almighties but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by Christian truth 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 Spirit is of the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father not three Fathers, one Son not three Sons, and Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal.

- a. Creed often attributed to Athanasius around the 4th or 5th century.
- b. Direct statement on the nature on the Trinity, more thorough.
- c. Became a test of the orthodoxy and competence of the clergy in the West from the 7th century.
- d. Differences between Apostles and Nicene.
 - (1) More complex doctrinal character.
 - (2) More prosaic, less poetic.
 - (3) More as a plumb line of orthodoxy, less as a credo of faith.

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- e. Reformers highly accepted, some use among Anglicans, but the East did not recognize it; of significantly less importance in catechesis and liturgy.

The dangers of creed-making are obvious. Creeds can become formal, complex, and abstract. They can be almost illimitably expanded. They can be superimposed on Scripture. Properly handled, however, they facilitate public confession, form a succinct basis of teaching, safeguard pure doctrine, and constitute an appropriate focus for the church's fellowship in faith.

► G. W. Bromiley.
"Creed." **Elwell's
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Software**, 1998-99.

IV. Why Can a Creedal Theology be Critical for Establishing New Believers and Developing Indigenous Urban Christian Leaders?

While no commitment to any Creed can ever take away our responsibility to search the Scriptures daily in order to nurture and build our faith, nonetheless, a commitment to using the Creed as a safeguard for historic orthodoxy has great importance in grounding believers in the faith as well as training leaders for the urban church.

A. It represents a **historic, clearly defined outline summary** of the earliest's Christian leaders' view of the Apostle's doctrine.

1. It is historic: the Nicene is nearly 17 centuries old.
2. It is universally respected among traditions as an authoritative summary of the heart of the Apostle's teaching.
3. It has been used successfully throughout Church history as the curricula to ground new Christians and test emerging leaders as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

B. It can provide a **simple, memorable, and concise statement** of the substance of historic Christian belief.

1. Simple: not very wordy, provides essential summary.
2. Memorable: becomes an easy instrument to serve as core of one's orthodox commitment.
3. Concise: although abstract, it is extremely compact in its style but meaningful in its weight and concept.

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- C. It lays a **foundation for determining an evangelical ecumenism**, a plumb line whereby we can judge what is essential for mutual fellowship and service.
 - 1. The Nicene is a kind of universal statement of what Christians have believed on the core issues from the beginning.
 - 2. Probably the most celebrated document that is recognized by virtually every tradition of Christian faith.
 - 3. It deals with the essential truths that Christians have historically counted to be bedrock truths of the faith.

- D. It defines the **apostolic deposit that represents the defense of the Gospel** and full explication of Kingdom theology.
 - 1. Focuses on the core teachings of the apostles about God and Christ.
 - 2. Deliberately drafted to deal with anti-Christ heresies of the day.
 - 3. Highlights the core teachings of the Church, especially against its fundamental Christ-centered background.

- E. It provides the **content of Christian multiplication and reproduction**, the bare minimum for equipping new leaders and giving catechesis for new members in the church.
 - 1. A test of essential biblical conviction, accessible to everyone; the Nicene core is easily contextualized for both liturgy, confession of faith, and the Lord Supper.
 - 2. May be adapted easily as a standard for orthodoxy for Christian workers, ministers, pastors, and missionaries.
 - 3. Allows us to use a time-tested, Church endorsed rule for determining the doctrinal and theological credential for developing and emerging leaders.

- V. What Are the Implications for Church Plant Team Leaders?
 - A. **Embrace the Creed as a kind of shorthand for the Biblical Story**; not a replacement for the Story but a concise summary and brilliant highlighting of its most salient points.

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(1 Timothy 3.14-16, ESV) I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, [15] if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth. [16] Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

1. The Creed is **essential**; it provides a summary of the Christian Narrative in bold relief.
 2. The Creed is **Christo-centric**: the story of Jesus of Nazareth is the key to the entire self-consciousness of Christianity, and the key to understanding the hope of all twenty-first century disciples today.
 3. The Creed is **confessional**: the Creed is meant to become a part of our conscience and hope, a statement of our deepest convictions regarding how we understand the nature of the world, God, life, and the afterlife.
 4. The Creed is **celebratory**: it affirms in concise language we believe about God and Jesus, the Spirit, the Church, and the Age to Come we place ourselves in the sacred stream of men and women throughout history who have bled, suffered, and died on behalf of the biblical story.
- B. Recognize **the sophistication of the Creed's teaching**: it can easily be adapted to ground the new believer to empowering the sophisticated theologian, pastor, or bishop.
1. Determine your audience and their need.
 2. Relate your teaching to their context.
 3. Link your presentation to the readiness and grittiness of the hearts and lives of your people.
 - a. Show them why theology makes all the difference.
 - b. Connect doctrine to attitude and to perspective.
 - c. Use case studies to show how theological perspective bleeds into all fabrics of our psychological and social frameworks.

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- C. Allow the Creed to squire to help you defend the Apostle's witness to Jesus Christ against falsehood: the Creed is not as equal to Scripture, but serves as a historical statement of what the Church has contended for and defended for centuries.

(Jude 1.3-4, ESV) Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. [4] For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

1. Connect the struggles of your people with the struggles of Christians all over the world, and throughout all history.
 2. Relate the teaching of the Creed in its big panoramic vision to what is taking place today.
 3. Ground your people in the historical, worldwide, trans-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-national movement of Jesus.
- D. Be diligent to consistently rehearse historic orthodoxy with your church plant team, with your fledgling community, and with your developing leaders through the Creed.

(2 Timothy 4.1-5, ESV) I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his Kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. [5] As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

1. Do not hesitate to emphasize the critical, life-and-body shaping role of theology; show how theological perspective ultimately determines life outcome.
2. Challenge mentors always to connect specific details and issues to the great biblical narrative, which the creed summarizes and outlines.
3. Use the Creed to connect the faith and works of your people to the historic works of faith done from the apostles onward.

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(Ephesians 4.4) There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; [4.5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism; [4.6] one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

4. Tell the stories which breathe life into the Creed, and allow the Creed to become a means by which you can ground the new believer, encourage the disciple, and enrich the tested soldier.
- E. Finally, Make the Study, Recitation, and Discussion of the Creed a Critical Part of Your Church Planting Life.
1. Use the Creed in your devotions and corporate worship.
 2. Preach on the topics included in the Creed in the community of believers, and emphasize it within your Christian education.
 3. Develop studies and curricula for your growing disciples and emerging leaders on the Creed as a criterion of doctrinal and theological necessity.

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