

Creeds



In 1960, the United States Post Office (now the Postal Service), issued this set of commemorative stamps depicting credos of six important Americans. The word "credo" comes from the Latin for "I believe" and is synonymous with "creed." I collected U.S. stamps at that time and remember no outcry over this stamps, although I suppose some might have misgivings about the famous Patrick Henry quote, "Give me liberty or give me death," just as some New Hampshire residents have problems with the state's "Live Free or Die" motto. It seems that, by and large, Americans have little difficulty with secular credos, but religious credos have been a source of controversy since the first centuries of the church.

In this issue of ET&N, we'll briefly review the history of Christian credos and examine the role of credos in the church.

Then

In earlier issues, I commented on the tragic truth that two important elements of the Christian life—baptism (see ET&N 26) and the Eucharist (see ET&N 36)—that were intended to be unifying experiences had instead become sources of conflict. Such too is the case of credos, which were intended to unify the teaching of the church. There were seven ecumenical councils recognized as authoritative by the western church — Nicaea I (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680-81), and Nicaea II (787). At the first of these in Nicaea, located in what is now northwestern Turkey, not far from Istanbul, 318 bishops and other influential Christian leaders met at the encouragement of Emperor Constantine to confirm orthodoxy. It met primarily to reject the opinions of Arius, who taught that Christ Jesus was a second, inferior God, and the most notable outcome of the council was the adoption (by all but two attendees, who were consequently given the boot) of a statement of beliefs:

"We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance with the Father, through whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and our

salvation descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and cometh to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing; or who maintain that He is of another hypostasis or another substance [than the Father], or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, [them] the Catholic Church anathematizes."

It was an attempt to unify the doctrine of the church around a common core of beliefs, a noble effort certainly. At Constantinople I 56 years later, the council formally adopted an altered version of the Nicæan Creed:

"We believe (I believe) in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and born of the Father before all ages. (God of God) light of light, true God of true God. Begotten not made, consubstantial to the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and was made man; was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and the third day rose again according to the Scriptures. And ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of whose Kingdom there shall be no end. And (I believe) in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son), who together with the Father and the Son is to be adored and glorified, who spoke by the Prophets. And one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We confess (I confess) one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for (I look for) the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen."

More than 1600 years later, this Nicæan Creed (or, more properly, Nicæan-Constantinople Creed) remains the most important and widely-recognized creed of the Christian faith. The five ecumenical councils that followed Constantinople I each ratified the creed. It is ironic that although more than one of these councils certified the accuracy and sufficiency of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, each proceeded to add doctrines. The Council of Ephesus (431), for example, decreed that "it is not permitted to produce or write or compose or bring forth or produce another creed...", yet it added the identification of the Virgin Mary as "Mother of God" (Theotokos). It is no wonder the Protestant movement eventually rejected the authority of these councils. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, states that "all synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice, but to be used as a help in both." (31.4)

Leaders of the Reformation Movement went even further. Alexander Campbell referred to Christian creeds as "unadulterated evil," claiming that "Christian union can result from nothing short of the destruction of creeds and confessions of faith, inasmuch as human creeds and confessions have destroyed Christian union," and "that nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church, or be made a term of communion among Christians that is not as old as the New Testament; nor ought anything to be admitted as of divine obligation in the Church constitution or management, save what is enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles upon the New Testament Church, either in express terms or by approved precedent."

But Campbell's view certainly has its challenges. The case is so strong for the biblical basis for creeds that one creedal scholar concludes, "Anyone who, in the name of the New Testament, declares an opposition to the very notion of creeds is obliged to come to terms with the priority...of creed within the teachings of Jesus himself and his apostles..." (Pelikan, Jaroslav; *Credo*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2003).

It is impossible to honestly argue that creeds have not indeed been the source of disunity, but is it the content of creeds or their use that is an "unadulterated evil"? In dictating doctrine at the ecumenical councils, the ancient church claimed its authority based on an unbroken chain of succession from the Apostles. Ultimately, this comes down to the question of authority for each believer. Should s/he look to God's revelation through His son preserved in the New Testament canon (as portrayed in Figure 1) or does further doctrine in the form of church tradition carry equal weight (as portrayed in Figure 2)?

Figure 1

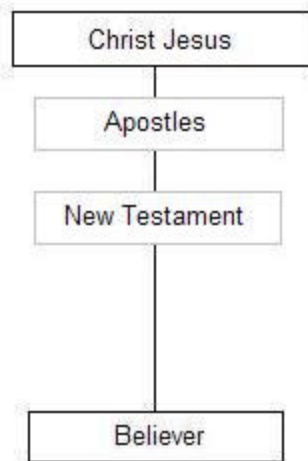
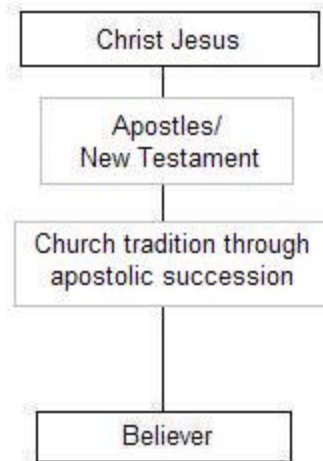
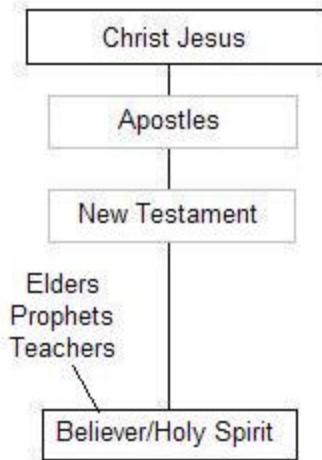


Figure 2



If Figure 2 is correct, then what is really the direct value of Scripture since it must be filtered and interpreted by church tradition? Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200), bishop of Lyon, said as much by stating that the truth is to be learned "from those (presbyters) who...possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father" (*Against Heresies*, 4.26.5). If Irenaeus is correct, then a centralized, hierarchical church has every right to proscribe a creed, not to mention prayers, worship style, deeds, etc.

Figure 1a



But Figure 1 implies that any believer's interpretation of Scripture is as good as any other, so it is too simplistic. Figure 1a better represents the alternate to the authoritative, hierarchical church because elders, prophets, teachers, and others within the church certainly influence the individual believer. Most importantly, each believer is promised the gift of the Holy Spirit and one of the Spirit's most important functions is to help the individual believer understand, interpret, and apply Scriptural lessons. Without the Holy Spirit (and the wisdom of more mature Christians), a non-hierarchical church is left to the vagaries of individual interpretation, which is prohibited by Scripture:

"But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God"

(2 Peter 1:20-21).

What does all this have to do with creeds? Everything! If authority rests in church tradition, then individuals Christians are obliged to subscribe to and profess authorized versions. If authority rests solely with Christ Jesus (see Matthew 28:18), then creeds are a matter of individual conscience.

Creeds in Scripture

Creeds are undeniably part of the New Testament—both the citation of Old Testament creeds and the creation or repetition of creeds based on faith in Christ Jesus.

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is one! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

To the Jews, this is the most important creed in Scripture. Referred to as the Shema (the first word in the passage), this is the text Jesus Himself used when a Pharisaical lawyer asked Him "which is the great commandment in the Law?" Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus attested "This is the great and foremost commandment" (Matthew 22:36-38). He immediately added a portion of Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus obviously had no problem quoting a biblical creed. It is ironic that the Shema was the basis on which many Jews had difficulty with Jesus and His church. To them, worshipping Jesus as a God was a violation of this fundamental tenet.

The Christian biblical corollary would have to be Peter's statement in Matthew 16:16: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus considered Peter's statement of belief so important that He responded, "upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Parenthetically, it should be apparent that it is this human belief in Christ that is the foundation of the church, not Peter himself. To Peter's statement of belief, we can add Nathaniel's: "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art King of Israel" (John 1:49) and Thomas':

"My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), as well as numerous other specific and implied statements in the New Testament.

Even more notable, perhaps, are several passages in Pauline letters which are at the very least statements of faith and, in some cases, apparent recitations of early Christian creeds, either created or repeated by Paul. Three passages in particular stand out:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, 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. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles..." (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)

"Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6-11)

"By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:
He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

While the 1 Corinthians passage appears to be a personal statement of faith, the Philippians and 1 Timothy passages are so highly structured in the original Greek (something that is largely lost in English translations), that they may well have been creeds repeated by early Christians (or perhaps early hymns). It is likely that these creeds or hymns are not original to Paul, and Paul had no problem either stating his beliefs (creed) or repeating those that encapsulated foundational truths.

When Paul reminds Timothy that he "made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Timothy 6:12b), he may well have been referring to a statement such as the 3:16 passage, which he refers to as a "common confession." Very early, there is ample evidence that some sort of witnessed creedal (belief) statement was required of converts before and/or at baptism. Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian court official is one clear example:

Philip had preached the Gospel to the inquisitive Ethiopian and "As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him." (Acts 8:36-38)

Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the early Church

The Ante-Nicene (before 325) writers (see [ET&N 30](#)) often included creeds in their works. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote a series of letters to churches as he was transported to Rome for execution early in the first century:

Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life. (*Letter to the Thallians*, Chap 9, ca. 105)

Justin Martyr, the best-known early Christian apologist, defended Christianity against charges of atheism (because Christians refused to worship the traditional Roman gods or defied emperors) in an address to Emperor Antonius Pius:

"We are not atheists, worshipping as we do the Maker of this universe...and with gratitude to Him to offer thanks by invocations and hymns for our creation, and for all the means of health, and for the various qualities of the different kinds of things, and for the changes of the seasons; and to present before Him petitions for our existing again in incorruption through faith in Him. Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judaea, in the times of Tiberius Caesar; and that we reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third..." (*First Apology* XIII, ca. 140)

Elsewhere, Justin used a series of clauses that would later become familiar through their use in the Nicaea-Constantinople creed:

"...this very Son of God—who is the First-born of every creature, who became man by the Virgin, who suffered, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate by your nation, who died, who rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven..." (*Dialogue with Trypho* 85.2, ca. 150)

Tertullian, the sometimes-controversial but still influential leader of the early second century, wrote extensively about the "rule of faith," using words and phrases that are, again, highly reminiscent of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds:

...there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. (*Anti-Marcion* I.13, ca. 207)

Tertullian also alludes to an elaborate baptismal ritual accompanied to a public profession: "When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel." (*The Chaplet III*)

Such creedal elements can be readily found in the writing of many other early writers. Irenaeus, Novatian, Origen, Hippolytus, Tatian, and Clement of Alexandria all refer to the kind of triune belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is found in the New Testament and the ancient creeds and baptismal confessions.

Very early in church history, the simple statement of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:36-38) may have been sufficient, but even within the span of the Apostolic period of the church (until about 100 A.D.), different beliefs about Jesus appeared. Some believed He was not a man at all, but only appeared to be one, or that He did not really die on the cross, but only appeared to do so. Others believed He was only a man in whom God's Holy Spirit dwelt from the time of His baptism by John until He suffered on the Cross. Such beliefs denied the basic nature of Jesus and even of Father God Himself, and the church recognized the threat they embodied to the teachings of the Apostles. It is not surprising, therefore, that the church developed more complex creeds to separate sound doctrine from heresy. It was the same impetus that led to the development of the canon of Scripture (see ET&N 25). In fact, creeds were often referred to as Rules (Greek, canon) of Faith.

The earliest such creed was the so-called "Apostles' Creed," which has roots back as far as about 140 A.D. The legend that this creed was dictated by the Apostles, each contributing a phrase, has no basis, but the creed clearly represents apostolic teaching as found in the New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul. The version that is usually recited today, which dates from somewhere between the 5th and 7th centuries, is not the earliest form. The bracketed and italicized words and phrases below are those in the later, "received" version of the Apostles' Creed:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; [Maker of Heaven and Earth;] and in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord; who was [conceived by the Holy Ghost,] born of the Virgin Mary; crucified/[suffered] under Pontius Pilate, was [crucified, dead, and] buried; [He descended into hell;] the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at 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."

This creed, while certainly the oldest one preserved, was never "officially" adopted by the great councils of the western church, although its content contributed to later creeds.

The only other ancient creed of significance is the Athanasian Creed, which has been (probably) incorrectly attributed to Athanasias (c296-373), bishop of Alexandria and prolific Christian writer. It represents a more detailed and elaborate development of the doctrine of the Trinity, but since it is rather lengthy and certainly does not date within the ante-Nicene period, I will not consider it here, nor other related conciliar innovations, such as the Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon.

Now

It should be clear that creeds formed an important part of the ancient church, both during and after the apostolic period. What then are the objections to the use of creeds in the church today? To mainstream Christians, the content of both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicaea-Constantinople Creed present few, if any, difficulties. There are more "liberal" denominations that deny the virgin birth, those that will debate the nature of judgment, and those that question resurrection of the body, but by and large, the content of these creeds represents the consistent and historical beliefs of Christianity...as far as they go.

The problem I personally have with the historic creeds is that they leave an enormous gap between "was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary" and "was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate." Where in the historic creeds is the recognition of Jesus' moral and ethical teaching? Where is the call to live a radical life of discipleship? Reciting the Nicene (Nicaea-Constantinople) Creed is essentially meaningless without action based on the beliefs:

"You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" (James 2: 19-20)

Where in the creeds is there any acknowledgment of James' clear (often controversial) statement?

Even so, Alexander Campbell did not label creeds a "calamity" because of their content—his writings show his clear acceptance of every aspect of the historic creeds. To Campbell, creeds were a calamity because of their use as a bludgeon against those with beliefs differing from the majority position. Nearly every denomination in existence today, along with agreement (usually) with the concepts of the Nicene Creed, adds its own spin on sound doctrine.

Pentecostals add baptism in the Holy Ghost as an event separate from water baptism and the obligatory demonstration—speaking in tongues—of individual receipt of the Holy Ghost. Catholics, as noted, have turned Mary into the "Mother of God," even claiming her Christ-like bodily assumption into heaven. The International Church of Christ (Boston Movement) has added an authoritative "discipler." Lutherans add an ecclesiastical order. Methodists add that tongues "are repugnant to the Word of God." Calvinist Presbyterians add irresistible grace and unconditional election. Christian Scientists give Mary Baker Eddy's Science & Health virtually equal authority with the Bible, as the Mormons do with Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon. In some cases, the additions have a biblical basis, but the point is that these denominational creeds, statements of faith, or membership qualifications serve to exclude others, whereas the Gospel served to include as many as possible.

Anything we as Christians use to exclude others from fellowship with Christ Jesus is a calamity, whether it be proscribed creeds, absolutes about baptism, or frequency of communion. To me, baptism is critical to entering into the Christian life, the opportunity to celebrate what Jesus did for me each week through the symbols of communion is an immense privilege, and the public profession of personal beliefs is important. But if I use those, or any other aspect of faith, to exclude others (*you aren't a Christian because...*), I am acting in direct contradiction to the example of my Lord Jesus Christ.

Few Americans would claim that someone who does not subscribe to one or more of the statements on the "American Credo" postage stamps cannot be an American. Why are we more inclusive in our secular beliefs than we are in our spiritual ones?

Personally, I can readily read the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed when I attend churches that do so—in fact, there is something distinctly affirming about doing so. As a weekly event, it might become stale and less meaningful, but then there are those who suggest that about weekly communion. So, if I were leading worship services, I think I'd include a weekly reading of one of the ancient creeds—scriptural creeds like Matthew 16:16, 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Philippians 2:6-11, and 1 Timothy 3:16, as well as ancient creeds like those cited here. While the church has no right to bind individual believers to a specific human creed, the reading of these ancient creeds reinforces our connection to the earliest beliefs and teachings of the Apostles and their early spiritual descendants.

Discussion

I was very encouraged by a number of notes I received after the last **ET&N**. I appreciate the many kind remarks.

There was at least one significant typo in the last issue, pointed out by subscriber Joyce—in the second paragraph of the NOW section, the sentence "Where is the call to leave a radical life of discipleship?" should have read "Where is the call to **live** a radical life of discipleship?" That's corrected in the website versions.

Subscriber Darryl from Texas sent me this interesting comment:

I found an interesting reading just last week from Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address (the Appendix) that actually took me by surprise. His view of creeds was not as negative as some have supposed. Campbell did not object to creeds—only to their abuse and their tendency to draw lines of fellowship.

"As to creeds and confessions, although we may appear to our brethren to oppose them, yet this is to be understood only in so far as they oppose the unity of the Church, by containing sentiments not expressly revealed in the word of God; or, by the way of using them, become the instruments of a human or implicit faith, or oppress the weak of God's heritage. Where they are liable to none of those objections, we have nothing against them. It is the abuse and not the lawful use of such compilations that we oppose."



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Giving

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