



CHRISTIAN
CREEDS *for*
BEGINNERS

FREE EBOOK

Michael F. Bird

WHAT
CHRISTIANS
Ought to BELIEVE

AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE THROUGH
THE APOSTLES' CREED

Michael F. Bird

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PREFACE

In recent years, I've enjoyed taking my children through the Apostles' Creed. We've read it together, discussed it, looked up Bible passages, prayed around it, and even memorized it. If you ask me, the Apostles' Creed is probably the best syllabus ever devised for teaching basic Christian beliefs. It is succinct, easy to read, yet immensely profound. The Apostles' Creed is basically a bullet-point summary of what Christians believe about God, Jesus, the church, and the life to come. It is a rudimentary survey of what Christian faith affirms and indeed what all Christians ought to affirm if they are to be called Christians.

Sadly, I know of many churches that make no effort to recite, teach, and confess the Apostles' Creed or any creed for that matter. Indeed, the decision to omit the creeds from worship, preaching, teaching, and Bible study is often quite deliberate. A reticence to employ the creeds as instructive tools is largely borne of a mixture of skepticism toward tradition, a rank biblicism that ignores historical theology, and a certain arrogance that all who came before us were either incomplete or erroneous in their theology. The result is a theological travesty where a treasure trove of riches remains untouched. Even worse, by ignoring the creeds those who consider themselves to be orthodox are effectively sawing off the theological branches upon which they are sitting.

In this book, I have in mind to present the case for why Christians who are not by habit "creedal" in their devotion and discipleship should change their attitude toward the creeds and make use of Christian creeds as part of their statement of belief, worship, preaching, and teaching. I maintain that, as a prime example, embedding the Apostles' Creed in our corporate church life is an excellent way to ensure the integrity and orthodoxy of our faith and also a great means to infusing some ancient wisdom into our spiritual journey.

I have set out in an earlier volume an extensive summary of the evangelical faith—that is, the ancient and apostolic faith of the church as seen through the lens of a modern and missional Protestantism.¹ In this slender book, I have a modest aim to set forth a summary of the basic elements of the Christian faith as outlined in the Apostles' Creed with a view to the theological formation of undergraduate students and keen Christian disciples. Along the way I also hope to demonstrate how the creeds came into being, how they relate to Scripture, and why the creeds remain important for us today. The main effort of this book rests on expositing the Apostles' Creed as a way of summarizing the teaching of Scripture to enable followers of Jesus to “fear the Lord your God” (Deut 10:12), to “know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4), to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:13), and “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people” (Jude 3).

1. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

CHRISTIAN CREEDS

for BEGINNERS

Who Needs Creeds When I've Got a Bible?

I used to provide regular supply preaching for a warm and intimate fellowship of Christians in the Free Church tradition. I cheekily smiled to myself whenever I read their bulletin because it always had on it the words, “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.” The irony, of course, is that those words are not found in the Bible. This delightful group of saints had in fact turned their pious motto into a type of extrabiblical creed. Their genuine concern not to court controversy over creeds led to the formation of their own anticreedal creed as it were.

Hesitation about the value of the ancient creeds for modern Christians is quite understandable. If your only experience of creeds is mindless repetition, if you've been exposed to seemingly esoteric debates about technical theological jargon that does not appear relevant to anything, if you've ever been confused about how the creeds relate to what the Bible actually says, or if you think that the whole process of writing creeds and confessions just becomes divisive, then you may certainly be excused for some misgivings about creeds.

The problem is that it is no good just to say, “We believe the Bible!” Noble as that might sound, it runs into several problems. The fact is that many groups claim to believe the Bible, including Baptists, Episcopalians, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostals, and many more. Yet you cannot help but notice that these

groups do not always agree on what the Bible teaches. Most of the time these differences are fairly inconsequential, but other times the differences are absolutely gigantic. Whether we should baptize babies or only believing adults is significant, but is hardly going to shake the foundations of the cosmos. Whether Jesus was an archangel who briefly visited earth or the coequal and coeternal Son of God who was incarnated as a man makes an immense difference, with a whole constellation of things riding on it. If you do believe the Bible, then sooner or later you have to set out what you think the Bible says. What does the Bible—the entire Bible for that matter—say about God, Jesus, salvation, and the life of the age to come? When you set out the biblical teaching in some formal sense, like in a church doctrinal statement, then you are creating a creed. You are saying: this is what we believe the Bible teaches about X, Y, and Z. You are saying: this is the stuff that really matters. You are declaring: this is where the boundaries of the faith need to be drawn. You are suggesting: this is what brings us together in one faith.

Creeds Are Biblical!

Something we need to remember is that creeds are in fact found in the Bible! There are a number of passages in the Old and New Testaments that have a creedal function. In Deuteronomy, we find the Shema, Israel's most concise confession of its faith in one God. Hence the words: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4–5). These are the words that faithful Jews across the centuries have confessed daily. It was this belief in one God that distinguished the Israelites from pagan polytheists and even to this day marks out Judaism as a monotheistic religion in contrast to many other world religions. The Shema described the essential elements of Israel's faith in a short and simple summary. The Shema stipulated that Israel's God was the one and only God, the God of creation and covenant, the God of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who had rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Furthermore, the Israelites

were to respond to their God principally in love, as love would determine the nature of their faith and obedience to him. As God had loved them, so they in return must love God. No surprise, then, that the Shema was affirmed by both Jesus and Paul and held in tandem with their distinctive beliefs about kingdom, Messiah, and salvation (see Mark 12:29; 1 Cor 8:6). What that means is that Jesus, Paul, and the first Christians were creedal believers simply by virtue of the fact that they were Jewish and lived within the orbit of Jewish beliefs about God, the covenant, and the future.

Given that context, it is perfectly understandable that the early church developed their own creeds to summarize what they believed the God of Israel *had done* and *would yet do* in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus's tomb was not long vacated when persons in the early church began to set out summaries of their faith in early creedal statements. Among the first believers were those who composed a short summary of the basic beliefs that were shared by Christians all over the Greco-Roman world.

To begin with, what was arguably the most pervasive of early Christian beliefs was that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead:

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again. (1 Thess 4:14)

[Jesus] died for them and was raised again. (2 Cor 5:15)

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. (Rom 4:25)

Christ died and returned to life. (Rom 14:9)

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (Rev 2:8)

What is striking is that this belief that Jesus was crucified and was raised to life was affirmed in diverse types of material in the New Testament. It is found in liturgical material, apostolic exhortation to congregations, snugly inserted into theological argumentation, laid out in hymnlike poetry, and

even found in New Testament prophecy. It was a belief that was as pervasive as it was popular. Furthermore, this statement was the fulcrum of the church's confession about who Jesus was and what God did through him.

We find more elaborate creedal statements appearing in Paul's letters. During Paul's imprisonment in Rome, he wrote a letter to Timothy in Ephesus, and in this letter Paul referred to what was very probably an early creed:

*He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)*

This creed gives a basic summary of Jesus's career from incarnation to his exaltation. Each line tells us about some key event in his earthly mission. It is a short summary of the story of Jesus and functions as the touchstone of faith. It doesn't say everything there is to say, but it gives the basic outlines into which other beliefs can be seamlessly added to fill out the picture.

Another important passage is the famous "Christ hymn" found in Philippians 2:5–11. This passage might not be an actual hymn; it could simply be poetic prose or a fragment of an early statement of faith that Paul had received from others. In any case, it is a majestic description of how Jesus went from divine glory to servile humiliation to exaltation to the right hand of God the Father.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something
to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,*

Christian Creeds for Beginners

*being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11)*

This wonderful text sets forth the story of Jesus’s incarnation, his redemptive death, and his accession to divine glory. Whether sung, read, or recited, it certainly lends itself to a creedal function as it sets out what Christians believe about where Jesus came from, why he died, and why he should be worshipped.

Creeds Carry Biblical Traditions

The creedal-like materials that we find in the New Testament are part of a general pattern of “teachings” or “traditions” that were composed and passed on for the benefit of the churches. We find evidence in the New Testament for a large body of instruction being orally transmitted to the nascent churches by the apostles. In the Pauline churches, this included the story of the gospel (1 Cor 15:3–5), Jesus’s final supper with his followers (1 Cor 11:23–26), and a general body of Christian teachings (Rom 6:17). Indeed, Paul tells the Thessalonians that they should “stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15). Similarly, the risen Jesus tells the church in Sardis to remember “what you have received and heard” (Rev 3:3). What Jude calls the “faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” refers to the faith taught in the Old Testament Scriptures, the teachings of Jesus, the story of Jesus, and the apostolic instruction in the way of Jesus (Jude 3). The

spiritually gifted teachers of the church passed on these teachings—stories and instructions about Jesus—which provided the substance for the later creeds of the church (see Acts 13:1; Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28–29; Eph 4:11; Heb 5:12; Jas 3:1).

We might say that early Christian instruction was the exposition of a “tradition,” that is, a collection of teachings that were passed on by Jesus to his apostles, combined with a distinctive way of interpreting the Old Testament that made Jesus the centerpiece of God’s promises, a tradition interpreted and augmented in light of their experience of God in life and worship, which was then transmitted and taught among the churches.¹ This “tradition” is what largely generated the New Testament. The Gospels are the traditions of Jesus that were passed on by eyewitnesses, received by early leaders, and written down by the evangelists (see Luke 1:1–4). The New Testament letters use a lot of traditional materials—hymns, creeds, sayings, stories, vice lists, virtue lists, etc.—to instruct congregations in light of the situations they were facing. When leaders in the postapostolic church sought to transmit their faith to other churches through correspondence, they were trying to summarize what they had learned from the Jewish Scriptures and the disciples of the apostles and were attempting to lay out the common consensus of the faith as they understood it. The creeds that were subsequently written were largely the attempt to provide concise statements about the faith that had been received in the church. In other words, early traditions shaped the New Testament, and then the New Testament subsequently shaped the developing traditions of the church, traditions that crystallized into the later creeds. Thus, the creeds are really a summary of the New Testament tradition: the text and its history of interpretation in the churches.

You cannot read the New Testament apart from some tradition. Even the pulpit-pounding fundamentalist who claims that the Bible alone guides him still appeals to an established consensus within his own community to validate his exposition of the Bible as a true and accurate account. This tradition, even if not openly acknowledged, is regarded as an authoritative declaration about what the Bible says in that group. Even the most jiving and thriving of Pentecostal churches has a *normal* way of doing Sunday

1. On the importance of “tradition,” see Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 64–70.

morning worship that does not jump directly from the pages of the New Testament. This *normal* way of doing worship, how they organize everything from songs to sermons, is a type of tradition too.

Inasmuch as we all have a “tradition,” the creeds arguably provide the best tradition within which to read Scripture. This is because the creeds should be regarded as a biblically generated tradition that meets with the consensus of the universal church about what the main teachings of the Christian faith are. The creeds constitute an attempt to guide our reading of Scripture by setting out in advance the contents and concerns of Scripture itself. The creeds provide a kind of “Idiot’s Guide to Christianity” by briefly laying out the story, unity, coherence, and major themes of the Christian faith. In that sense, a creedal faith is crucial for a biblical faith and vice versa!

Creeds in the Cradle of the Early Church

The creeds became particularly important in the second century when the church was faced with many challenges about the integrity of its faith. Various groups, some quite popular for a time, often had vastly different ideas about Jesus, discipleship, and salvation. The Ebionites claimed that an angel or a heavenly Christ figure entered into the body of the man Jesus at his baptism. The Docetists denied that Jesus had a physical body. The Gnostics claimed that a wicked demigod created the world, and Jesus came to save us from this god by releasing our souls from our bodies with the secret knowledge of our primeval origins. In each of these heresies there are vastly different ideas about God, God’s relation to creation, the identity of Jesus, the meaning of salvation, and hope for the future.

Most of the creeds were written in response to some heresy or doctrinal controversy. We might say that the creeds are basically the written account of several relationship breakdowns in the early church. While the early church was in many ways diverse and far from monolithic, certain groups on the fringes were advocating a form of belief that exceeded the acceptable limits of diversity and were no longer recognizably Christian. They were espousing

a different God who sent a different Jesus to fix a different problem in humanity. The heretics had to be voted off the island because the truth of the gospel and the unity of the church were under threat.

The debates were over no small matters. The bishops and theologians were not arguing over the appropriate length of church candles. For example, the attempt of the Marcionites in the second century to play off the God of creation against the God of redemption was neither convincing nor wholesome. It looked as if Jesus had come to save people from the God of the Old Testament, a totally unacceptable proposition. The efforts of the Arians in the fourth century to insulate Jesus from the divinity of the Father shattered the whole edifice of the gospel. If Jesus was a created being, a supreme angelic creature no less, he could not be our Savior, because one created being cannot eternally save another created being. The heretics were warned, but they didn't listen. So they either left or were shown the door.

The Christians who composed these creeds often did so with a view to distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic expressions of the faith. The creeds attempted to differentiate between a faith rooted in Scripture and one adapted to satisfy the sentiments of popular philosophies of the day. The creeds drew a line between a faith drawn from Scripture and understood in light of apostolic testimony and a different faith emerging from a combination of pagan philosophy and incoherent readings of Scripture. The creeds endeavored to discern the difference between a faith that made sense of their experience of Jesus and one that deliberately obscured things in order to make knowledge of God the possession of an elite few. In sum, the purpose of the creeds was to mark out the boundaries of the faith. The creeds were warnings to the effect that "all who proceed beyond this point do so at the peril of their own souls."

Meet the Ecumenical Creeds

There were many creeds and declarations about doctrine made by leaders in the ancient church. However, the most famous creeds, because they were the most widely utilized, are generally known as the three ecumenical creeds

and the Chalcedonian definition. These statements of faith are all upheld by the Western church, that is, the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Creed: Apostles' Creed

Date: ca. AD 200

Origins: According to legend the Apostles' Creed, or *Symbolum Apostolorum*, was written by the apostles ten days after the ascension. In reality, however, the Apostles' Creed probably emerged in Rome as an early statement of faith used at the baptism of new converts in the late second or early third century (ca. AD 215). The precise wording of the Apostles' Creed developed over several centuries, and the present form goes back to the eighth century. It is not used in the Eastern churches.

Creed: Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed

Date: AD 325, 381

Origins: Emperor Constantine called for a council of bishops to deal with the controversial teachings of an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius. Arius was a popular preacher who taught that Jesus was a created being *like* God the Father but *not the same as* God the Father. The council took place in AD 325 and its central affirmations were that Jesus was truly God, he was of the same essence as the Father, and he was begotten not made. However, the debate continued for the next fifty years, with the political class committed to an Arian interpretation of the Creed of Nicaea.

Another council was called in Constantinople in AD 381 to deal with the teachings of Apollinaris, who taught that the *Logos* replaced the soul of the man Jesus, thereby injuring his full humanity. In response, the council expanded the Creed of Nicaea to include affirmations about the deity of the Holy Spirit, gave more explicit wording to the incarnation, and referenced the eternal nature of Jesus's kingdom. The Nicene Creed is the creed recited by all Christian churches, East and West, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, as the definitive expression of the Christian faith. The sixth century Latin-speaking church created controversy when it added the so-called *filioque* (Latin for "and the Son") clause to the Nicene Creed. This addition was made to emphasize that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This cosmetic addition ensued the conversion of the Goths from Arianism to Orthodoxy. Yet it was the catalyst for a schism between the Eastern and Western churches in AD 1054 since the Eastern churches did not accept the addition, a rejection that lasts even to this day.

Creed: Chalcedonian Definition

Date: AD 451

Origins: While the matter of Jesus's deity was settled by councils held at Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381), continuing debate surrounded how Jesus's human and divine natures related to each other. A meeting was held at Chalcedon in AD 451 where the council rejected several erroneous views on the relationship between Jesus's two natures. The formula that was agreed on was that Jesus's two natures were distinct yet united without confusion, change, separation, or division.

Creed: Athanasian Creed

Date: ca. AD 500

Origins: The Athanasian Creed was not written by Athanasius but was likely named after him; it affirms the central Trinitarian and christological beliefs of the post-Chalcedonian church.

Our focus in this volume will be the Apostles' Creed. Strictly speaking, the Nicene Creed is the most catholic and ecumenically recognized of the creeds as it is recited in both the Western and Eastern churches. However, the Apostles' Creed is profound for its pure simplicity and its concise coverage of the major topics of Christian teaching. The Apostles' Creed is the faith that all professing Christians should know, what all pastors and priests should teach, and what all bishops and theologians should defend. According to the nineteenth-century church historian Philip Schaff:

As the Lord's Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue the Law of laws, so the Apostles' Creed is the Creed of creeds. It contains all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith necessary to salvation, in the form of fact, in simple Scripture language, and in the most natural order—the order of revelation—from God and the creation down to the resurrection and life everlasting.²

2. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Volume 1: The History of Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 14–15.

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The Apostles' Creed is chiseled in stone in the chapel of Beeson Divinity School, and every candidate for admission is asked to write an essay on it. Thank you, Michael Bird, for a fresh exposition of this classic expression of our Christian faith. Thank you for reminding us of what too many Protestants, evangelicals no less than liberals, have forgotten: creeds matter!

TIMOTHY GEORGE, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and general editor of the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*.

You know what I love about Michael? He writes in a colorful, accessible, and engaging way even though he is a scholar of epic proportions; he writes to regular people like me. I'm going to take the staff of Transformation Church through *What Christians Ought to Believe* and I will use it to introduce new Christians to the faith.

DERWIN L. GRAY, Lead Pastor, Transformation Church; author of *The High Definition Leader: Building Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World*.

The genius of this book is the way in which it makes profound truth a pleasure to read. The general reader will be both engaged and richly encouraged by Bird's winsome exploration of the Apostles' Creed. His direct and even chatty style makes you feel as if you are visiting an ancient cathedral in the company of a friendly and yet knowledgeable tour guide. I would commend *What Christians Ought to Believe* to study groups and to individual Christians looking to deepen not just their knowledge of the Christian faith but their knowledge of the triune God.

REV DR. MICHAEL P. JENSEN, St Mark's Anglican Church, Sydney

Michael Bird has done a huge favor for those whose traditions need to be reacquainted with the Apostles' Creed as more than a pedantic statement. He uses the Creed as it was intended to be used—to teach and form Christians in the living way of Jesus! Well-researched and engagingly written, Bird's volume will prove valuable in both church and academy, for those considering Christian faith as well as seasoned saints. His wit, clarity, and scholarship reflect the inherent winsomeness of the theological task and of a creed-contoured faith. I'm already looking for ways to use it.

DON J. PAYNE, Associate Professor of Theology and Christian Formation,
Denver Seminary

What Christians Ought to Believe is more than a clear, concise exposition of the essential tenets of faith informed by the very best of biblical and theological scholarship. With deep-rooted evangelical conviction and his trademark wit, Professor Bird also makes a compelling case that even committed biblicists can appreciate the beauty, instructional value, and fidelity to Scripture found in the ancient Creed.

RHYNE R. PUTMAN, Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture,
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We all have a tradition through which we read Scripture, and Michael Bird argues that the Apostles' Creed ought to be that tradition. Far from competing with the Bible, this ancient summary of the faith is an aid in rightly understanding the Bible. Bird approaches the Creed as a syllabus for teaching basic Christian belief, and like the experienced professor that he is, guides his readers through the Creed by highlighting the contours of the narrative and the convictions of the faith. Mike's books have been a constant source of encouragement for me, and in this one the Bird soars high in showing the sweeping narrative of Scripture and the core beliefs that emerge from it. I'm grateful that because of this book many will be able to say with more conviction and clarity: "I believe."

JEREMY TREAT (PhD, Wheaton College), pastor at Reality LA,
professor at Biola University; author of *The Crucified King: Atonement
and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology*.