

Christian Creeds and Doctrines

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Introduction

As the Apostle Paul was active in establishing and growing Christianity throughout the Mediterranean, he provided instruction and clarification to shape the doctrines of the early church. These doctrines were expressed in simple confessions as evidenced in his writings to the church in Rome “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved”¹ and to his disciple Timothy “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”.² These early statements of belief helped define the core beliefs of early Christianity. In this paper I will explore the history of the writings of the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. I will also provide expanded information on the doctrines of Christian faith expressed in the creeds and touch on the major debates of the reformation and importance of the sacraments in the Christian church.

The Creeds

During the first century, Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman empire and believers were required to worship in secret, making it difficult to develop common beliefs between groups. Not only was Christianity illegal, but active destruction of places of worship and arrest were realities in an effort to suppress Christianity. As a result, admission to the church was a serious matter to protect the congregation and required a statement of faith in God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ as the Son of God, belief in the Holy Spirit and baptism to affirm their commitment to Christianity. However, during the second century, Christians in the Roman empire began to emphasize key texts that would be read in public worship and provided clear consensus on matters of life, thought and shared beliefs. Evidence of the earliest creeds such as

¹ Rom. 10:9 (NASB)

² I Tim 3:16 (NASB)

that of the Latin theologian Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225), provided summaries of Christian faith and began to emerge in the late second century and were referred to as the “rule of faith.”³ The final consensus of the “rule of faith” was settled in a creed known as the Apostles’ Creed or the “Apostolic Creed” by the Council of Milan in 390.

As Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire under the Christian Emperor Constantine, public debates among the bishops of Rome worked to sort out the differences within the Christian church. In order to bring religious harmony to the empire, Constantine called for the council of Christian bishops to bring consensus to theological doctrines in the town of Nicaea in 325. Over the next century this creed, now known as the “Nicene Creed” was refined and officially confirmed during the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Nicene Creed, developed by bishops, is longer and details more doctrine on the divinity and humanity of Jesus.

The Doctrine of Faith and the Person of God

The introductory lines of text of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty”, and the Nicene Creed, “We believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty” establish the foundation of the creeds and are based on a belief or faith. So, what is faith? Faith is the act of placing our trust in a held belief. Our trust must be both placed in someone or something and define a set of beliefs. Faith is a matter of conviction in the heart and beliefs put words to describe our faith. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) writes “faith is not an accuracy of logic, but a rectitude of heart.”⁴ For Christians, the creeds establish that we put our trust in God

³ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 57.

⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 60.

and follow with a statement of Christian beliefs. The Bible illustrates a conviction of faith that is demonstrated by taking action as in the stories of Abraham leaving his family and the first disciples leaving their vocations at the irresistible call of Jesus saying, “Follow me.”⁵ Biblical faith is extraordinary and internalized to encompass a Christian’s identity and commitment.

During the period of Enlightenment (1750 – 1950), thinkers considered faith as belief unsupported by evidence and came to regard human reason as holding authority over answering the questions of the world. However, this universal extreme position has come into question as being limited. Blaise Pascal (1623-62) proclaims “Reasons final step is to realize that there are an infinite number of things which lie beyond it. It is simply feeble if it does not get as far as realizing that.”⁶ Postmodern writers suggest that reason limits human knowledge to logic and mathematics. Terry Eagleton says, “We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”⁷ Pope John Paul II suggests that unaided reason cannot answer the mysteries of life, but “the truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason”.⁸ These considerations lead us to the Christian understanding of God.

Can God’s existence be proven? Reason limited to logic and mathematics has not proven God’s existence. Theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) offers his “five ways” as an argument for God’s existence. First, the world reflects God’s divine signature in the order of the created world. The fact that the world is not static, but everything is in motion is evidence for God. Every movement must have an origin back to an original force that set the universe in

⁵ Mark 1:17 (NASB)

⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*

motion. His “cosmological argument” suggests that the mere existence of the universe requires explanation and his “teleological argument” claims that the world shows obvious traces of intelligent design that must have a designer.⁹ In more recent times, C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) and G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) appeal to prove the existence of God by common sense and observation. Lewis states “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”¹⁰ Chesterton telling why he converted from agnosticism to Christianity “Numbers of us have returned to this belief; and we have returned to it, not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere; because the coat, when it is tried on, fits every crease... We put on the theory, like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass.”¹¹

Christians understand God as the God of Abraham of the Old Testament and the God in whom Jesus of Nazareth believed. Christians also uniquely link Jesus as the “exact representation”¹² and God Himself supremely revealed as the God of the Old Testament. The Apostles’ Creed states God as “the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth”.¹³ To help comprehend God, the writers of the Bible have used analogies to reflect God’s character and help readers relate to a known experience or role. The Bible illustrates God as a personal God and pictured as a Father or as a Shepherd to communicate His character. God the Father brings His children into existence, He cares for us as a father cares for his children. Not only can we know about God, but we can know God personally and have a relationship with Him. As “Almighty”, God is capable of doing anything.

⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Heb. 1:3 (NASB)

¹³ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 66.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity involves the belief that God is manifested in three distinct persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet remaining one God. The Holy Spirit is specifically represented in Christian baptism when Jesus commands “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ The Hebrew word “ruach” is used to describe the Spirit of God. The English language would translate this into three descriptive words based on the context to represent wind, breath and spirit. In Exodus 14:21 a powerful wind divides the Red Sea. In Genesis 2:7 God breathes life into Adam. And the prophet Isaiah was inspired by the Spirit in Isaiah 61:1. The doctrine of the Trinity names the persons of God and tells the story of God the creator, the Son as redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the helper. Paul tells Christians that “the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”¹⁵

Christians believe that humanity is sinful. Sin is the result of a moral failing that separates us from a pure and Holy God. Genesis 3:1-5 depicts man desiring to be autonomous from God. Augustine of Hippo describes man as receiving God-given freedom, but choosing to advance his own self-centered desires unable to break from his entanglement with sin.¹⁶ Eastern Christian traditions describe sin as a “wrong turn” whereas western Christian tradition describes sin as a “fall”, but both need renewal.¹⁷ Salvation for Christians is the act of bridging that separation through Jesus.

¹⁴ Matt. 28:19 (NASB)

¹⁵ Rom. 8:26 (NASB)

¹⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

Christology – The Doctrine of Jesus

“If theology is to be understood as trying to make sense of God, then Christology is about trying to make sense of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ The identity and doctrine of Jesus is linked to His impact on people during His ministry, the validation of Him as Messiah and Son of God through the resurrection, and the impact of His achievements on humanity in a broad sense. The creeds confirm that Jesus is a real person who was born, lived in Palestine and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea. The Christian creeds consolidate the themes of New Testament interpretation of the identity and significance of Jesus.

Early sects tried to make sense of Jesus and developed viewpoints that are notable since some of these viewpoints tend to be raised today, but have long since been rejected. Ebionitism, a primarily Jewish sect, regarded Jesus as an ordinary human being.¹⁹ His humanity was easily recognized, but his divinity needed explanation. Docetism is another view that argued that Jesus was totally divine, but simply appeared to be human, thereby reducing the suffering of Jesus to be apparent instead of being real. This viewpoint declined as other competitive views were argued. Arius, an Alexandrian priest, argued that Jesus was not divine but preeminent by being “first among the creatures.”²⁰ Athanasius explained that only God can break the power of sin to save humanity. How could Jesus be the savior if He is not divine, God incarnate. Athanasius’s logic was fully adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.²¹

The Doctrine of Incarnation

Originating from the Latin word for “flesh”, the Christian doctrine of incarnation asserts that Jesus is both human and divine. He acts as God and He acts for God. The Nicene Creed

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ Ibid., 88.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

declares that “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.”²² There was a minority that adopted a view, called “Monophysitism”, that there is “only one nature”, that Jesus was only divine. This view was not adopted by the Council of Chalcedon.²³ It is notable as this view remains today with some eastern Mediterranean churches. Being fully human and fully God, Jesus is uniquely positioned to be a “mediator” between God and man. Dorothy L. Sayers argues if Jesus is only man, then He is irrelevant to any thought about God. If Jesus is only God, then He is irrelevant to human experience.²⁴ Calvin argues that no man can ascend to God because of their sin, so Jesus has to be divine to serve as our mediator. Jesus is uniquely qualified to transmit knowledge of God to man and to re-establish the relationship between God and man separated by sin.

The Doctrine of Salvation and Atonement

The Christian doctrine of salvation has been richly developed by Paul as he clarifies and illustrates the benefits Jesus Christ secures for believers. These images are communicated through relatable analogies. Salvation is a “release” from danger or captivity. Salvation is a picture of being “adopted” into the family of God. Paul affirms that we have been “justified through faith”²⁵ or made right in the sight of God. Salvation is pictured as “redemption”, securing release through the payment of a debt. Salvation is illustrated as a “reconciliation” or restoration of a broken relationship.²⁶

²² Ibid., 89.

²³ Ibid., 90.

²⁴ Ibid., 91.

²⁵ Rom. 5:1-2. (NASB)

²⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 93-94.

The Christian doctrine of atonement explains how the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus reconciles humans afflicted by sin and separated from God. McGrath says “God must redeem humanity in a way that is consistent with His own nature and purposes. Redemption must in the first place be moral, and in the second place be seen to be moral.”²⁷ Sin is a disruption of the moral order and must be made right to restore fellowship between God and man. A worthy payment must be made, but humans do not possess the ability to satisfy the debt. If God became human, He could assume the human obligation to bring satisfaction and He would possess the divine ability to pay the debt required for redemption. This mediator must sacrifice Himself. It is a permanent and unfailing payment. Jesus, our mediator, represents humanity. Through His obedience to death, He provides the worthy payment for the sins of humanity. Jesus, standing in as a substitute in our place, takes on Himself human guilt. The righteousness He achieved by paying the penalty on the cross is then transferred to humanity through faith in Him. Jesus has defeated death and sin through His resurrection from the dead and is installed as the ruler of all. So how do Christians participate in the benefits of His death and resurrection? Paul tells us “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”²⁸ In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul uses imagery of a Roman conquest and victory parade as the gates of hell are being thrown open through the conquest of Calvary.²⁹ Through His achievements, Jesus fulfills His office as King, Priest and Prophet.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 98.

²⁸ Rom. 10:9. (NASB)

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:57

³⁰ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 102.

The Doctrine of Grace

The Christian doctrine of grace asserts that God's choice of people is not determined by merits of the individual, but by God's love and will. Israel was chosen by God not because of what they achieved or offered, but because of the grace of God. So Christian salvation is not to be achieved by merit, but by His grace. Paul tells the church of Ephesus that "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."³¹

In the late fourth and early fifth centuries theologians sought to crystalize the New Testament's teaching on grace. Augustine of Hippo contended that humanity is universally affected by sin like a disease that people passed from one generation to another. Augustine proposes that salvation is the work of God given as a gift of grace out of love. Pelagius contended that humans are capable of following God's commands and it was only because of frailty and lack of commitment that we fail. Pelagius believed that humanity is justified by works and salvation is achieved by following Jesus's moral example.³² The church agreed with Augustine's position, but this controversy of salvation by works or grace has been a consistent and recurring debate throughout the centuries.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther sought to reform the church position of salvation by grace according to Paul's writing to the church of Rome saying "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand."³³ Luther promotes the idea that justification is achieved by faith alone (*sola fide*) imputed by the righteousness of Jesus. This doctrine, in opposition to the Catholic position of justification from the grace of

³¹ Eph. 2:8 (NASB)

³² Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 104-105.

³³ Rom. 5:1-2.

God, became a major source of disagreement between protestant writers and the Catholic church and is seen as the major issue to divide Christianity during the Protestant Reformation.

The Doctrine of the Church and the Sacraments

What do Christians understand by the word, church? The Nicene Creed says, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”³⁴ Four words (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) in this statement define the “four marks” of the Christian church. “One” references a universal church which embodies all Christian believers in all communities. “Holy” describes the church as set apart by God. “Catholic” does not refer just to the Catholic church but means “without leaving anything out” including all Christian believers. Finally, “apostolic” means the church has a “direct link with the Apostles” and operates according to the patterns of ministry found in the New Testament. One of the ways that the church remembers and celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is through the sacraments. Sacraments are signs that bear witness to its cause. The eucharist and baptism are the two most common sacraments of the Christian church that are external signs of spiritual realities that Christians believe. Catholics recognize baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, healing penance, anointing of the sick, marriage and ordination whereas Protestants recognize only baptism and the eucharist.

Personal Reflection

I attended a Catholic school during grade school where we recited the Apostles’ Creed and received the eucharist every day. For most of my life I have attended a Baptist church where the creeds were not recited and the eucharist was reserved for seldom occasions. I have incorporated the eucharist in times of individual spiritual preparation, at my rehearsal dinner with family and other special events. I see the value of centering our attention on core beliefs through

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

recitations and enjoy those occasions where I get to recite the creeds and share in these sacraments with Christian believers from other denominations. The creeds have maintained our focus on the core beliefs of Christianity for many centuries and have resisted minor divisions that threaten to tear the church asunder. I also recall the routine of daily practices that often resulted in missing the purpose of these rituals and believe church leadership should provide balance to regularly incorporate the creeds and sacraments to maintain their significance.

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