

The Need for Creeds

Why Would We Develop Creeds in the First Place?



The Bare Essentials

We are about to examine the history and importance of “creeds” in the context of our Christian faith, but before we begin, humor me a bit and imagine the following story to be true...

It's wartime in your land of origin, and your hometown is very near the war zone. Your own family has suffered many casualties due to the war. It is a sad and dangerous time. Families have been separated, and many have suffered. As an example, you have never even met your own father. As Spring approaches, despair is settling over the region.

One day a man knocks on your door. He is wearing a military uniform. He introduces himself as a friend of your father! He tells you that your home city is in danger. He tells you that he as knows your father quite well. He says that he fought with your father. The man says that your father sent him to give you the following message:

“Tell my son to meet me on the day following Easter at the Central Train Station. I will be waiting for him after lunch. The green sweatshirt will identify me. Tell him to be there and I will make sure that he avoids the coming disaster.”

The man leaves your home and you are left to ponder what he told you. As you think over the facts related to his message, you decide that you believe what he told you and that you will do whatever it takes to meet your father. It is the first week of March, and you begin to make plans to meet your father on April 3rd, the day after Easter.

OK, if this actually was your situation (if my little imaginary story was true), you might want to pencil out some of the things you know in an effort to make sure that you did meet your father so that you could be spared the disaster that is about to befall your city. If you were to capture the essence of what you now know, it might look something like this:

An Accurate Minimum Summary:

It is a time of war and tragedy
Your father is alive
He has a friend
He sent a messenger
He gave instructions for you
He will meet you on the Day after
Easter
He will meet you at the Central Train
Station
He will be there after lunch
A green sweatshirt will identify him

He will help you avoid disaster
A disaster is coming

This quick summary is now your blueprint to the truth related to your situation, your father and to the meeting you are about to have with him. You know what you've just done? You've created a "creed", an accurate minimum summary of the essential truths related to the message from your father and his plan to save you.



We All Use Creeds

All of us develop creeds. We can't help it. It's a part of the nature of understanding truth. The word 'creed' is derived from a Latin word:

"Credo" (Latin) = "I believe"

A creed is simply a statement of what you believe to be TRUE. In our daily life, all of us develop summaries of truth in order to live and survive in our world. All of us have guiding principles and summaries of truth that move us forward as we work, play and live our lives. For example, as a father, I hold certain principles to be true related to how my children are to be raised. To be honest with you, the guidelines that I have embraced for raising my children are very ancient principles. They are tried and tested. They have stood the test of time. I believe these are truths in parenting that apply not only to me, but to other parents as well. You see, I hold a 'creed' related to the raising of children.

I bet you hold a number of creeds as well. What is your belief about the best way to bake a pie? What is the truth that you hold about the way one should safely cross the street? What do you believe about the history of the American Revolution? If you were to write about these truths and form a list of what you believe to be true, you would, in essence, be creating a 'creed'. Creeds are simply accurate interpretations of truth; lists that summarize what you believe about any particular topic.



Creeds Have Gotten a Bad Name

Now, it seems that creeds of all sorts have gotten a bad name, particularly in our present relativistic culture. Think about it for a minute. When we say that we 'believe' something, we are really saying that we 'believe something to be true'. But are we saying that our creeds are just true for us, or are we saying that our creeds are objectively true for everyone? In many cases, it may depend on the thing we are trying to describe.

Let's look, for example, at the story of your father and his wartime effort to save you. Is the 'Accurate Minimum Summary' simply a list of your personal opinions, or is it a list of objective truths? Is our list subjective or objective? It seems to me that this list is a summary of objective truths related to the situation with your father. This is important to recognize. The truth about your father and his plan to save you must be understood as an OBJECTIVE reality. If what you believe about your father and his message are just your own private opinion (and are not objectively true), then you really can't TRUST that you know what your father actually intended to communicate! You might be completely wrong about the message your father sent, and if you are wrong, you may very well miss him altogether. The timing for his meeting with you is a matter of objective truth, and it's important to understand this truth CORRECTLY. If you were to hold an incorrect understanding of this truth, you would miss the

meeting altogether!

This is why creeds are so important. There are some things that are a matter of personal subjective belief. We may form a creed about the best way to bake a cake, for example. But there are other things that are simply objectively true for all of us; like the manner in which one may cross the street safely, or in this case, the manner in which you are going to meet your father.

You may notice here that creeds are far more critical in the context of OBJECTIVE truth than they are in the context of subjective opinion. Your creed about the best kind of donut, for example, is not nearly as critical as your creed for the best medicine to use to treat diabetes. As the search for OBJECTIVE truth becomes a priority, creeds become increasingly important. If everything is relative and merely a matter of opinion, then creeds are nothing more than an expression of personal taste and their value is diminished. Perhaps this is why creeds are coming under fire in our increasingly relativistic culture. In fact, they are beginning to come under fire within Christianity as well...



An Anti-Creedal Faith

As a Christian, I am convinced that the claims of Christianity are the most important claims in history. I am also convinced that these truths we hold are OBJECTIVELY true. Christians throughout history have believed that the Christian truth claims are objective truths about the nature of God and the nature of our world. Perhaps this is why creeds have always been an important part of the Christian Faith.

But we are now living in a time when Christians are not even sure that objective truth EXISTS, let alone that we, as Christians, might hold it. In a world like this, creeds are becoming unpopular and Christian truths (also known as DOCTRINES) are taking on a bad name. What used to be referred to lovingly as 'doctrinal truth' is now being referred to derisively as 'DOGMA'. As the Church seeks to negotiate itself with the relativistic culture in which we live, it is increasingly relinquishing its belief in objective truth. A new version of Christianity is emerging, and it is a distinctly "anti-creedal" form of the faith.

It's now more and more common to hear Christians speak up against the notion of creeds. Look at what theologian LeRon Shults says about how "Emergent" theologians should view creeds:

"Various communities throughout church history have often developed new creeds and confessions in order to express the Gospel in their cultural context, but the early modern use of linguistic formulations as "statements" that allegedly capture the truth about God with certainty for all cultures and contexts is deeply problematic for at least two reasons. First, such an approach presupposes a (Platonic or Cartesian) representationalist view of language, which has been undermined in late modernity by a variety of disciplines across the social and physical sciences (e.g., sociolinguistics and paleo-biology). Why would Emergent want to force the new wine of the Spirit's powerful transformation of communities into old modernist wineskins? Second, and more importantly from a theological perspective, this fixation with propositions can easily lead to the attempt to use the finite tool of language on an absolute Presence that transcends and embraces all finite reality. Languages are culturally constructed

symbol systems that enable humans to communicate by designating one finite reality in distinction from another. The truly infinite God of Christian faith is beyond all our linguistic grasping, as all the great theologians from Irenaeus to Calvin have insisted, and so the struggle to capture God in our finite propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry." (From the May 4th, 2006 [Emergent US Blog](#))

Creeds have simply become unappealing to a world that is uncertain that truth can even be expressed with any language at all. But think about it for a minute. Mr. Shults doesn't seem to have any problem trusting the explanatory power of language when he is telling us that language is untrustworthy! This type of philosophical approach to language relies on the very same language to make its own claims. In essence, the notion described here is self refuting. The emerging anti-creedal Christian community seems to be saying:

"No Creed But the Bible"

or

"No Creeds At All!"

But these definitive statements of truth are, in fact, just two more creeds! In order to say that no doctrinal position about truth should ever be taken, we first have to take a doctrinal position about the truth of doctrinal positions! You see, we really can't help ourselves when it comes to making truth claims (creeds).



Creeds Are Dependent

When some people argue that no creed aside from the Bible is to be used by Christians, they may actually be expressing their fear that the truth of the Bible will somehow be distorted by the thoughts and interpretations of man, and this is a real concern, even for those of us who rely on creeds as a statement of truth. But let's remember that creeds are **DEPENDENT** reflections of truth. They are not **INDEPENDENT** sources of truth. You may find yourself reading the CliffsNotes or SparkNotes for "To Kill a Mocking Bird" in order to study for a test, but you would never imagine destroying all copies of "To Kill a Mocking Bird" would you? You would never want the CliffsNotes or SparkNotes to replace the original novel! In a similar way, even those of us who value objective truth and the use of creeds would never assume that they are **SOURCE** material. They are only accurate minimum summaries.



Creeds Are Developed Over Time

Ever wonder why anyone would even think of developing a creed in the first place? Well, creeds become important the minute that someone tries to **MISCHARACTERIZE** the truth! That's right, creeds have historically appeared in **RESPONSE** to mischaracterizations of Biblical truth. Let me demonstrate how this might happen. Let's go back to our story of your father. Let's say that after being visited by the messenger, you told your friends about the incident and the message. They listen to your words and form the following conclusions:

- 1. Your father does not care much about you; he's never made any attempt to see you!*
- 2. The messenger is no friend of your father; he told you that he's been fighting with him!*

3. *Your father wants you to wait until they have an Easter Celebration at the Central Train Station (whatever year that may eventually be) and THEN meet him there the next day.*

4. *There is something mystical about the color green. He wants you to wear a green sweatshirt so he can identify you.*

Now as you analyze their conclusions, it's clear that they have misunderstood and mischaracterized the message that was first delivered to you. If what they say is true, then your father doesn't truly care about you, his messenger cannot be trusted (he is not, after all, a friend of your father), it's not clear now WHICH day after Easter he intends to meet you, and it's also not clear WHO should be wearing green! If we don't get these facts right, we are either going to distrust the message or misunderstand it to the point that we won't meet your father at all!

Now is a great time to review the truth of what was told to you, and this time you may want to look at it in the form of the creed you first developed. But perhaps the creed itself is no longer enough! The minimum summary fails to address these mischaracterizations that have been raised by your friends. Now you may want to add an additional layer of truth. You may want to add further clarifications based on reasonable inferences that you can make from the first accurate minimum summary:

**An Accurate Minimum
Summary:**

It is a time of war and tragedy
Your father is alive
He has a friend
He sent a messenger
He gave instructions for you
He will meet you on the Day after
Easter
He will meet you at the Central Train
Station
He will be there after lunch
A green sweatshirt will identify him
He will help you avoid disaster
A disaster is coming

**A List of Reasonable
Inferences:**

Your father cares about you
(that's why he sent for you)
Your father is friendly and the
messenger is his friend
(they are fighting TOGETHER,
not WITH each other)
He wants you to meet him at the
CTS THIS Easter – not later
(due to the urgency of the
situation)
HE will be wearing a green
sweatshirt
(green is, after all, a military
color)

Your 'creed' has gotten a little bit longer, hasn't it? Your list of 'truths' now includes this secondary list of 'reasonable inferences'. These secondary truths are just as true as the first truths, but they expand the description and are more detailed than the 'minimum summary'. But these additional details ARE clearly needed at this point in order to counter the mischaracterizations that have been offered by your friends. After all, it's truly important to correct these misperceptions, isn't it? If we don't, the original message will be completely misinterpreted and perhaps even ignored! That's why we must add the additional layer of truth from the reasonable inferences that can be made based on the facts of the accurate

minimum summary.

This is very similar to what has happened in Christianity over the course of time. The first Christians formed a list of core beliefs that became their accurate minimum summary. They did this in an effort to understand and communicate the distinctive truth of the Christian worldview. But it wasn't long until others began to distort the truth and mischaracterize it, often to suit their own needs. When this happened, the Christian community responded by trying to clarify the details based on the reasonable inferences that could be made from the accurate minimum summary. The doctrines that emerged from this process were every bit as true as the minimum facts, and were a necessary clarification in order to prevent the faith from being distorted and misrepresented.

This is why you will find that the first creeds of the church are so much shorter than the creeds that were later developed over time. It's not that NEW truths were being added. It's just that clarifications were needed to prevent a distortion of the facts. As an example let's look at one of the earliest creeds that does an excellent job of presenting an accurate minimum summary of the truth. It's called the Apostle's Creed:

**The Apostle's Creed
An Accurate Minimum Summary
of Christian Truth:**

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 (Hades); 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.

Now, while this creed has the advantage of being concise, it doesn't exactly outline the nature of the Triune God, does it? In fact, this creed could be affirmed by many who are NOT Christians at all! Couldn't Mormons, for example, affirm this creed? Yet Mormons are polytheists who deny the triune nature of God. As Christians, we believe that the nature of God as a triune being is clearly taught in the Bible, and the earliest believers also understood this to be true from the teaching of the apostles. The Apostle's Creed takes this truth for granted, assuming that everyone understood the concept. But over time, as the apostle's died and contact with the primary witnesses became a thing of the past, many so-called

'Christians' began to abandon those things that the first believers took for granted.

So, when the nature of God and Jesus began to be mischaracterized in the early centuries of the church, additional creeds were expanded in an attempt to more clearly describe the Christian God. For example, is Jesus God? Has he ALWAYS existed as part of the Godhead? Is He the creative force in the universe as John described in the first chapter of his gospel? Or is He merely a created being? As Christians, we would say that Jesus is God Himself, come to earth in the form of a man. We would say that He is the creator of all things, just as the Bible describes. But is this clear in the Apostle's Creed? Not really, or at least not very accurately or completely. So, it wasn't long in the history of the faith before believers felt the need to clarify the nature of Jesus, particularly in response to those who would deny these truths. So let's compare the Apostle's Creed with a later creed of Christianity, the Nicene Creed:

**The Apostle's Creed
An Accurate Minimum Summary
of Christian Truth:**

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 (Hades); 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.

**The Nicene Creed
A Summary Including Reasonable
Inferences:**

I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, all that is, seen and unseen. I 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. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he 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. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I

acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Now, you may have noticed that this second creed is indeed longer than the first, and this is the pattern we see in the history of the faith. Later creeds are more detailed and specific than the earlier creeds.



Can We Go Too Far?

So, is it possible that we could go too far in our attempt to clarify and describe the truths that we hold? Are there some things that are essential and must be defended, and other things that are NOT essential and can be left to the imagination? Of course there are. While there are truths that define us (and exclude others) as Christians, there are many issues in the Bible that are not clearly described and intentionally left 'gray' by God. These tertiary issues are interesting points of discussion, but NOT issues that we, as Christians, should divide over.

Let's look at this in the context of our story about your father. We'll begin with a review of the 'Accurate Minimum Summary' and 'List of Reasonable Inferences' related to the nature of your father and his message to you. Next, we'll add a list of some things that COULD be true based on the first two lists, but are really just a matter of opinion (meaning that they may just as well be UNTRUE):

An Accurate Minimum Summary:

It is a time of war and tragedy
Your father is alive
He has a friend
He sent a messenger
He gave instructions for you
He will meet you on the Day after Easter
He will meet you at the Central Train Station
He will be there after lunch
A green sweatshirt will identify him
He will help you avoid disaster
A disaster is coming

A List of Reasonable Inferences:

Your father cares about you (that's why he sent for you)
Your father is friendly and the messenger is his friend (they are fighting TOGETHER, not WITH each other)
He wants you to meet him at the CTS THIS Easter – not later (due to the urgency of the situation)
HE will be wearing a green sweatshirt (green is, after all, a military color)

A List of Possible Truths:

Your father is a warrior
He is also a professional rescuer
He has many friends
The disaster will occur in May
The train is the only safe way to avoid the disaster
Green is the most important color to your father
Your hometown is under a curse and is a target of judgment
You alone have been chosen to be saved from the coming disaster

Now take a look at this last list. If you read it carefully, you'll notice that there is nothing 'essential' in it related to the message that he first delivered to you through his messenger. And in addition to this, there is nothing essential here related to his desire to save you and

the manner in which he will do so! If you didn't have this last list, you would still have all the information you need to understand the nature of your father and his plan for you. But look at the third list one more time. Are there some things here that are potentially INCORRECT about your father? Yes, there are some potential errors! The issues described in list three are merely possibilities. They may be accurate, and they may be completely false. The first two groups (the Accurate Minimum Summary and the List of Reasonable Inferences) are honest characterizations of the truth, the third list is merely a matter of opinion.

Now, over the course of Christian history, there have been some denominations who will divide from the larger body of Christians based on what is, in effect, the third list. They have decided that 'tertiary' non-essential issues (like those described in the third list in our imaginary story) are not really possibilities, but are, instead, essential truths. When people do this; when they claim that non-essential opinions are essential truths, they've simply gone too far.



That's Why We Need a Measuring Stick

You'll notice that the claims that are itemized in the first two lists have been summaries. Summaries are dependent on something other than themselves. They are REFLECTIVE of some OTHER source of truth. You'll also notice that the third list is NOT REFLECTIVE of an outside source of truth. The third list is simply number of OPINIONS that have been formed by way of speculation. Opinions emanate from the individuals who hold them and can't always be supported by the hard facts. You're not going to find support for the claims in the third list in the original story that we offered at the beginning of this article. The third list does not look to the original story for its verification.

So, what (in the end) is the 'measuring stick' that will ultimately decide if anything in these three lists happens to be TRUE? Well, the original story, of course! The original story is the source of truth here. We may do our best to understand and describe the truths found in this original story, but in the final account, something OUTSIDE our summaries (the original story) is going to be the 'measuring stick' for us.

As Christians, we also hold to this principle of relying on an outside source for the truth that we summarize and hold to be true. We must, in the end, bend our knee to the truth that is clearly described in the Bible, our 'original story'. The issues that are CLEARLY described in the scriptures will find their way into our 'accurate minimum summaries' and 'lists of reasonable inferences' (also known as creeds), but we must always be careful not to divide over the opinions that we may hold that are NOT clearly articulated in the Bible (our own personal 'lists of possible truths').

The seventeenth century Lutheran theologian and Augsburg pastor, Peter Meiderlin, is credited with a saying that seems to capture the essence of what we are talking about here. He lived in a time in which Lutherans and Calvinists were actually fighting about what should or should not be included in the 'creeds' of Christianity. In the midst of these often violent arguments about what should be called 'essential', Meiderlin wrote this three line plea for peace:

"In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus autem caritas."
(In essentials unity, in doubtful things liberty, but in all things love.)

This is our hope and our prayer as we move forward in our study of 'essential Christianity'. Are there some truths that are essential to our faith? What are these truths? What should be included in our list of 'accurate minimums' and 'reasonable inferences'? What issues should be left to the liberty of the individual believer? Let's try to discover these distinctions together and remember that LOVE must always be our guiding motivation.