

# Why Do We Have Creeds?



Basics of  
the Faith

S E R I E S

Burk Parsons



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We Have  
Creeds?

## **Basics of the Faith**

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

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*Be not ashamed of your  
faith; remember it is  
the ancient gospel of  
the martyrs, confessors,  
reformers, and saints.  
Above all, it is the truth  
of God, against which  
all the gates of Hell  
cannot prevail. Let your  
lives adorn your faith,  
let your example adorn  
your creed.*

—FOREWORD TO THE  
BAPTIST CONFESSION OF  
FAITH (1689)

▣ “I believe.” We hear these words every day of our lives. Whatever the context, we use these two simple words to express our thoughts about nearly everything. When we want to tell others what we are thinking or want to reveal the innermost affections of our hearts, we will often say, “I believe.” In his wisdom God created us not only with the capacity to believe, but also with an insatiable desire to explore, examine, and express our beliefs (Prov. 2; 1 Peter 1). We possess a God-given hunger deep within our souls that causes us to examine fundamental truths about everything God has revealed to us (Deut. 4; Matt. 22).

The mere fact that we believe in *something* doesn’t actually do anything for us. At the most basic level, a belief in *something* only provides us with the overwhelming sense

that we're not alone and that something exists beyond us. Everyone has a capacity to believe in *something*, and in fact everyone actually does believe something (Acts 17). Although the cynical skeptic might say, "I believe in nothing," the simple point is that he *does* believe in something, and according to him that something is "nothing." But even the convinced skeptic knows that it is impossible to believe in absolutely nothing. If someone claims to believe in nothing, the truth of the matter is that he actually believes in everything that begins and ends with himself as the source and object of his self-fashioned, self-centered faith. He has an open mind about everything, which, contrary to popular opinion, is not a good thing. As C. S. Lewis comments, "An open mind, in questions that are not ultimate, is useful. But an open mind about ultimate foundations . . . is idiocy. If a man's mind is open on these things, let his mouth at least be shut."<sup>1</sup> Someone who has an open mind will uncritically allow any and all data, no matter how absurd, to enter his mind and feel at home because he has no filters—no criteria—to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood, and even truth from half-truth (Prov. 1:22, 32). The open mind is an undiscerning open space, filled only with perceptions and inclinations.

In order for belief to have heart-changing and life-changing significance, it requires God as both its source and object (Ps. 68:26; 1 Cor. 2:5). As Christians we are new creatures in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit has graciously ripped out our hard hearts of stone and given us new, spiritually pliable hearts so that we are now able to believe, confess, and proclaim the glorious and eternal truths of God's sacred Word (Luke 24:45). We are to be open-minded to anything and everything that God has revealed to us, and by necessity we are to be completely, albeit graciously,



closed-minded to anything that contradicts what he has revealed. As Christians we believe, confess, and proclaim God's truth and nothing but God's truth. This is why we have creeds, so that with unwavering resolve we might stand firm in the faith once delivered to the saints—to the end that we and our children would believe, confess, and proclaim God's unchanging truth for his glory, for he is the source of everything we believe and, thus, his revelation is our creedal standard for all of faith and life.

## WHY DO WE HAVE CREEDS?

We have creeds because everyone believes in something, and even more to the point, everyone believes in God. Even self-proclaimed atheists believe there is a God, by virtue of God's revelation about himself in creation and the fact that all people are created in his image, and thus we are left without any excuse whatsoever (Rom. 1:18–20). So-called atheists know full well there's a God; they just hate God and find it easier for their consciences simply to pretend he does not exist.<sup>2</sup> But, as we know, even demons believe God exists and rightly tremble (Mark 5:7; James 2:19).

If everyone believes in God, the question then follows: what do we believe *about* God? To answer the question is to confess, or declare, our creed. A creed is a statement that describes our beliefs. The English word *creed* is a cognate of the Latin word *credo*, which means, "I believe." Dating back to the late twelfth century, the word *credo* likely emerged from the compound *kerd-dhe*, which can be translated "to put one's heart," pointing out the nature of a creed as that which we believe from our hearts and confess with our mouths.

As Augustine of Hippo confessed in a prayer, our hearts are restless until they rest in God and, as creatures made

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in God's image, we inherently possess the heart-capacity to believe and will, by necessity, possess some sort of creed. Whether formal or informal, written or verbal, in one way or another we all have a creed that details our beliefs. Some of us have a formal, written creed we adhere to, while others have an informal, unwritten creed that can easily change and perhaps often does change.

We are credal by our very nature and begin to form concepts of belief from the moment we are born. As we move from the formation of concepts to actual statements of belief, we are naturally inclined toward verbal and even written credal formulations that express our beliefs and unite us with other people around truths to which we all agree to adhere. Consider, for instance, a young child whose biological inclination is to trust his mother and father for nourishment, comfort, and protection. As the child matures, his perceived ideas about his mother and father are proven time and time again to the point that his nonverbal expressions turn into babbling verbal expressions that later mature into formal words when a child says to his mother and father, "Mommy and daddy, I love you so much." As that same child learns to read and write, some of his first drawings might depict the entire family with words expressing sincere love and affection for his family—all credal expressions of what that child holds to be true. Our children believe in their hearts they are loved, so they confess with their mouths they are loved and naturally want to proclaim their love to others. By God's design, the entire human race is credal—before the fall and after the fall—and will be throughout eternity in the new heavens and new earth. So the real question is not whether we have creeds. Rather, the questions are, What do we believe in our creeds? What is the nature of our belief? What is the authority, usefulness, foundation, and purpose of our creeds?

## DOCTRINE IS LIFE

In answering the question about what we believe in our creeds, we must first grasp what it means to believe. In our day, unlike in the days of generations past, we have a much too simplistic view of what it means to believe something. In the world today, many people use the word *believe* to describe their feelings about something or describe a fleeting wish or hopeful desire. But as we consider the word *belief*, or *faith*, in its fullest biblical sense, we see that the word implies God's gracious act of giving and our humble act of receiving and resting on him alone, which involves our entire being: heart, mind, and will.<sup>3</sup>

Although we use the word *belief* in conjunction with all areas of human experience, usually when we use the word it is in the context of religious belief. The word *religious*, however, and all its derivatives, has fallen on hard times recently due largely to its longtime inappropriate use among those who understood neither the true Christian religion nor the genuine relationship with Christ by faith alone on which all Christian doctrine is established. Thus, preferring to emphasize their personal relationship with Christ over and against the religion that comes as a necessary and appropriate consequence of that relationship, some Christians, with the best intentions, have relegated their faith to one area of life rather than allowing their faith to overflow into every area of life. But the overflow of faith is the essential nature of faith itself—to encompass all of life by acknowledging, affirming, and applying the Christian doctrine we believe, confess, and proclaim. In the New Testament, James (1:22–25) repudiates the “worthless” religion of those who are merely “hearers” of the Word without being actual “doers” of the Word.