

The Apostles' Creed

Lesson 1

The Articles of Faith

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what makes a tree a tree? Or a house a house? Or a person a person? Or to ask it another way, what qualities must something possess before we call it a tree or a house? These are complex questions that philosophers have been pondering for thousands of years. And we face a similar question when we approach the study of Christian theology. After all, there are countless churches that we would consider to be “Christian,” and many of them disagree about many things. So, it’s useful to ask, “What doctrines are fundamental and essential to Christian theology?”

Now, of course, as we ask this question, we need to be clear that individuals can be saved even if they have a very poor understanding of theology. Our commitment to Christ is sufficient to make us Christians. At the same time, it’s fair to say that there are several essential ideas that must be present in any theological system before it deserves to be called “Christian.” And since the early centuries of the church, the *Apostles' Creed* has provided a useful summary of these core beliefs.

This is the first lesson in our series on The *Apostles' Creed*, a well-known and widely used summary of what Christians believe. We have entitled this lesson “The Articles of Faith” because we will be looking at the *Apostles' Creed* as a summary of the articles or doctrines that must be affirmed by all those who would call themselves “Christian.” The *Apostles' Creed* appeared in various forms during the early centuries of the church. But it was standardized by about A.D. 700 in Latin. A popular modern English translation reads as follows:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.**

Our discussion of the *Apostles' Creed* as the articles of faith will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the history of the creed. Second, we will provide an overview of its statements. And third, we will focus on the importance of its doctrines for today. Let's begin with the history behind the *Apostles' Creed*.

HISTORY

As we survey the history of the *Apostles' Creed*, we will focus on two matters. On the one hand, we will look at the development of the creed, considering things like its authorship and date of composition. And on the other hand, we will look at the purpose of the creed, the reason the church thought it was important to create and to use it. We'll turn first to historical development of the *Apostles' Creed*.

DEVELOPMENT

It was once believed and taught that the *Apostles' Creed* was written in the first century by the twelve apostles themselves. It was even said that each apostle contributed one of the creed's twelve distinct theological statements. However, there is virtually no evidence that this took place, or even that any apostles were directly involved in the writing of the creed. But if the apostles didn't write the creed, who did?

The question of who wrote the *Apostles' Creed* is an open one because we do not have an author signed up for it. Almost certainly though these questions are questions that were asked of baptismal candidates going back perhaps as far back as 40 or 50 years after Christ. So, a person would be asked, do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth? And we know this because a number of people talking about their baptismal experience will refer to various of these questions. And by 200 A.D., Tertullius refers to what is called the *Old Roman Creed* which is almost identical to the *Apostles' Creed* and he refers to it in terms of those baptismal questions, "Do you believe...?" "Do you believe...?" ... The first reference to the *Apostles' Creed*, per se, is by a man named Rufinus in 390 A.D., and he relates the story that each of the twelve apostles, including Matthias who replaced Judas, gave one of the affirmations in the creed. There really is no proof for that theory, but the idea that in fact, these affirmations go all the way back to the apostles certainly has good basis.

— Dr. John Oswalt

In the writings of early Christians, there are many lists of essential doctrines that resemble the *Apostles' Creed*. On the one hand, there are rules of faith that catalog and explain fundamental beliefs in some detail. The writings of the early church fathers indicate that written rules of faith summarized the beliefs and practices of the churches that produced them. For example, Origen included a rule of faith in the beginning of his work, *On First Principles*, and Irenaeus included one in book 1, chapter 10 of his famous work *Against Heresies*. Rules of faith like these were intended to preserve the teachings of the church, and were used to train its people — especially its leaders. Often, these rules varied from congregation to congregation. Generally speaking, they included affirmations of important doctrines, as well as moral teachings and traditions.

On the other hand, some ancient doctrinal lists are in the form of creeds. These were short lists that summarized the doctrinal portions of the church's rule of faith, especially its most critical beliefs. These were often recited in liturgical settings, such as baptisms. In the first and second centuries, it may have been the case that each local congregation had its own creed, or way of summarizing essential biblical truth. But by the third or fourth century, some creeds were rising to greater prominence and being used in multiple churches.

One ancient creed that rose to prominence in this manner was the creed from the church in Rome, often called the *Roman Creed*. This creed is so similar to the *Apostles' Creed* that many scholars believe the *Apostles' Creed* to be simply a later version of the *Roman Creed*. But regardless of its precise origins, what is beyond question is that the *Apostles' Creed* eventually came into widespread use, especially in Western churches. In the early centuries, its precise wording varied somewhat from church to church. But in the eighth century the wording was generally standardized into the form that we recognize and use today.

With this understanding of the historical development of the creed in mind, we should look at the purpose behind the creation and use of the *Apostles' Creed*.

PURPOSE

In our day, many Christians are suspicious of creeds, and it isn't difficult to understand why. Although very few people would outspokenly claim that a creed has the same authority as Scripture, sometimes well-meaning Christians treat certain creeds if they were equal to the Bible itself. But no creed should ever be elevated to this level in theory or in practice.

The Bible is our only inspired, infallible rule of faith and practice. Creeds, on the other hand, are fallible teaching tools that summarize our understanding of Scripture. And as we are about to see, the *Apostles' Creed* was created to help Christians learn and remain true to the teachings of the Bible.

We will investigate the purpose of the *Apostles' Creed* in three steps. First, we will look at Scripture as the original repository of true doctrine. Second, we will look at the churches' traditional teachings as affirmations of Scripture. And third, we will see that the *Apostles' Creed* was intended to summarize the churches' traditional understandings of Scripture. Let's begin with the fact that dedicated Christians have always affirmed that Scripture is the basis of our doctrine.

Scripture

Listen to the words of the early church father Origen in the Preface to his work *On First Principles*, written in the early third century:

All who believe ... derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ. And by the words of Christ, we do not mean those only which He spoke when He became man ... for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets... Moreover ... after His ascension into heaven He spoke in His apostles.

Origen taught that Scripture in all its parts was the word of Christ, and that it was the source of all true doctrine. And listen to the words of the early third-century bishop Hippolytus, in section 9 of his work *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*:

There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source.

The early churches believed that the whole Bible was Christ's word, given to believers by the apostles. In this regard, they affirmed the concept that theologians often call *sola Scriptura* or Scripture alone. This is the perspective that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith, and the final arbiter in any theological controversy.

We find a clear example of this in the writings of Basil, who was elected bishop of Caesarea in A.D. 370. Basil was a strong defender of the traditions or customs of the church, and often expressed his beliefs that these traditions could be traced back to the apostles. Nevertheless, when there was a question about the truthfulness of these traditions, he appealed to Scripture as the final authority. Listen to Basil's words in his *Letter 189*, written to Eustathius the Physician:

Let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.

Here Basil admitted that some churches affirmed one set of customary ideas in their rule of faith, while other churches had contradictory customs. So, he appealed to Scripture as the highest authority to settle the matter.

The early church relied strongly on Scripture as the basis for all its doctrine. But they still depended on the traditional teachings of the church to summarize and protect the teachings of Scripture.

Traditional Teachings

Now, it's reasonable to wonder why the church felt it was necessary to preserve its traditional teachings. Wasn't it enough simply to preserve the Bible, and to let the Bible speak for itself?

Well, there's a need to formulate concise, clear statements on what the church believes, especially because there are false teachers who teach things that aren't in line with what the apostles taught and what the Bible teaches. And so, especially in response to these false teachings, the church needed to formulate a clear summary statement on what it believed.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The church had the Scriptures as the basis of its faith, but of course, the Scriptures were very long and literacy was very limited. So, it was best for the church to summarize basic doctrines in one creed in order for people to understand and comprehend the faith without having to read the entire Bible.

— Dr. Riad Kassis, translation

The *Apostles' Creed* was especially valuable, even necessary in early church history because the Canon of Scripture was not formally listed until around A.D. 397. So, what was the authoritative faith of the church? It was summarized in the *Apostles' Creed*. But at that time, we had the Bible, so why should we continue to have the creed? Because we can't require people to understand the whole Bible before we accept them as Christians. The *Apostles' Creed* still summarizes the essential teachings of the Bible in a simple way. And for this reason, it must continue to be used even now.

— Dr. Paul Chang, translation

False teachers created many problems in the church. Some even denied central aspects of the gospel itself. In response to these circumstances, godly Christian leaders created short summaries of the central teachings of Scripture so that all Christians would know and affirm the basic content of the faith. Listen to the way Origen described the problem in another section of the Preface to his work *On First Principles*:

There are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the

apostles, and remaining in the Churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolical tradition.

Notice what Origen said here. He did not say that the teaching of the church was infallible, or that it would always be perfect. Rather he said that the teaching of the church was to be accepted as true, *as*, or *because* it had been “transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles” and “preserved” until his own day. In other words, in Origen’s day, the teaching of the church was still an accurate summary of Christ’s words in Scripture. And for this reason, the church in his day was able to use it as a “standard” or “rule of faith” for testing doctrines. But the ultimate authority rested in the New Testament, not in the contemporary church.

We might illustrate this idea by thinking of a chain made of several links. The early church wanted to hold fast to the teachings of Christ, which could be found in Scripture. This makes Christ the first link. The apostles had direct contact with Christ, and were taught directly by him. So, their teachings are the second link in the chain. The apostles then preserved their knowledge of Christ in Scripture, making Scripture the third link in the chain. Each of these three links was perfect and infallible because it was superintended by the Holy Spirit.

But the fourth link, the traditional teachings of the church, was different. The transmission of these customs was not infallible; the Holy Spirit did not guarantee that they would be kept free from error. In fact, as we have already seen, the customs of some churches were contradicted by the customs of others. Some of these teachings pertained to minor matters of practice — things that Scripture does not directly address. But other traditions summarized the original meaning of Scripture, especially with regard to major articles of faith, like those listed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

When it came to these central beliefs, the traditions had been confirmed by many church leaders in many places throughout the ages. Moreover, they could be verified by direct appeals to Scripture. This is why Origen felt confident in setting forth the church’s traditional teachings as a rule of faith.

Nevertheless, this link was not infallible. It was always possible for the churches, for its councils, and for individual Christians, to make mistakes. Listen to the words that Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the third century, wrote in his *Epistle 73* against the doctrines held by Stephen, Bishop of Rome:

Nor ought custom, which had crept in among some, to prevent the truth from prevailing and conquering; for custom without truth is the antiquity of error.

Cyprian’s point was that some ancient Christian views and practices were not rooted in the truth handed to us from the apostles. Instead, they were “the antiquity of error” — errors that had crept into the church a long time ago. In fact, it was precisely this problem of human fallibility that made it important for the church to record its rule of faith in written form. Origen and other early church fathers wrote down the church’s rule of faith to make sure that Christians throughout the world would be able to compare their doctrines to the traditional ones. Church councils also recorded traditional teachings so

that their judgments would inform Christians in different places and times.

In all cases, the goal of preserving the church's traditional teachings was to ensure that the churches did not stray from the original meaning of Scripture, in order that believers would rightly understand the teachings of the apostles, in order that they would firmly grasp and live by the words of Christ.

The Bible is a very big book, and so you can't, in one sense, just let it speak for itself. You need to give a good summary of it. Even within the New Testament there are major challenges to the doctrine of who Christ is. And you can see the apostles trying to argue and to say, "No, this is the truth." And that issue continues into the second century A.D. Some major challenges to the doctrine of who Jesus is, and to the nature of the Bible. And so, they had to summarize the biblical faith as pithily, as shortly as they could do. And that gave rise to the *Apostles' Creed*. The important thing to remember is they're not actually trying to add to the Bible, they're trying to elucidate and to draw out its meaning.

— Dr. Peter Walker

As Basil wrote in his work *On the Holy Spirit* in A.D. 374:

What our fathers said, the same say we ... But we do not rest only on the fact that such is the tradition of the fathers; for they too followed the sense of Scripture.

Now, we should mention that in guarding its traditional teachings, the early church was not terribly worried about minor points of doctrine. They were focused on central, fundamental beliefs and practices. This is clear from the kinds of arguments they made in their writings, and from the kinds of things they listed in their written rules of faith.

For example, they wrote against Docetists, who denied the humanity of Christ. They wrote against Gnostics, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was evil, and who permitted all sorts of fleshly sins. And they wrote against many other false teachings that challenged the basic tenets of Scripture.

Having talked about Scripture and the church's traditional teachings, we are ready to look at how the *Apostles' Creed* summarized the church's traditional teachings for individual believers.

Apostles' Creed

As we have seen, the *Apostles' Creed* was largely used to confirm that new Christians believed the fundamental teachings of the Bible. In much the same way that modern churches disciple new believers in classes and Bible studies, the early church used creeds to train new believers in the basics of the faith.

Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, summarized the value of creeds in a sermon to catechumens, new believers preparing for their baptisms. In this sermon, the creed he had directly in mind was the *Nicene Creed*, but his words accurately summarize the purpose and use of all sorts of creeds in the early centuries of the church. In *A Sermon to the Catechumens: On the Creed*, Augustine wrote this:

These words which you have heard are in the Divine Scriptures scattered up and down: but thence gathered and reduced into one, that the memory of slow persons might not be distressed; that every person may be able to say, able to hold, what he believes.

As Augustine indicated here, the central teachings of Christianity are scattered here and there in Scripture. So, the ancient churches summarized Scripture's core doctrines in creeds. This ensured that every believer — even, as he put it, “slow” or uneducated persons — could affirm and hold fast to the fundamental teachings of Scripture.

Of course, since many congregations had different creeds, there was a sense in which they also had different minimum standards of belief. Some churches did not require sufficient understanding on the part of new believers, while others excluded believers who had true faith but lacked advanced theological knowledge. As a result, a person might qualify as a believer in some congregations but not in others. And in light of this disparity, the early church recognized the need for a creed that would be acceptable to every congregation that called itself Christian.

The *Apostles' Creed* rose to prominence in order to fill this need. It was a short, straightforward statement of beliefs that could and should be understood by all professing Christians.

The *Apostles' Creed* is actually a narrative summary of the Christian's faith. And it points out the fact that even though we believe that every single word of the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God, we are in need of a summary to help people understand what the essence of the gospel is. And the *Apostles' Creed* is just that kind of summary, emerging from so early in the Christian tradition, encapsulating what the apostles taught on the basis of Christ's revelation to them concerning the essence of the faith. “I believe.” Everything flows from that. And so, what's so important here is that the *Apostles' Creed* helps us to say everything we have to say in order to say enough to communicate the gospel.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Now that we have spoken of the history of the *Apostles' Creed*, we are ready to provide an overview of its affirmations. This big picture of what Christians believe can be just as useful today as it was in the early centuries of the church.

OVERVIEW

Over the years, theologians have described the content of the *Apostles' Creed* in a variety of ways. In this lesson, we will approach the creed's articles of faith from three perspectives. First, we will address the doctrine of God himself. Second, we will speak of the church. And third, we will address the topic of salvation. Let's begin with the doctrine of God in the *Apostles' Creed*.

GOD

The doctrine of God is absolutely essential to all that we say in terms of our Christian theology, our Christian faith, our Christian practice... Everything that we have in terms of how we understand ourselves, understand the world, understand our meaning and purpose, all goes back to who God is... Every single Christian doctrine whether it be salvation, the church, last things in terms of the future, all of that is rooted and grounded in the God who exists, the God who is triune. All of our hope and confidence in this life, all of what we think of in terms of our salvation and forgiveness of sins; all is rooted back in the God who has planned it all, the God who has brought about his will and purpose and the God who will end it all in terms of bringing his plan to accomplishment. So, everything goes back to who we think God is.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

There are two major aspects of the doctrine of God that appear in the *Apostles' Creed*. First, the creed is structured around the belief that God exists in Trinity. And second, it makes statements about the different persons of God, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let's look first at the Trinity.

Trinity

You'll notice that the *Apostles' Creed* is divided into three main parts, each of which begins with the statement "I believe." The first section speaks of belief in God the Father. The second section is about belief in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. And the third section summarizes belief in the Holy Spirit, and lists his active ministries.

Now, we should point out that not all ancient versions of the creed include the words "I believe" before the articles concerning Jesus Christ. In their place, many simply use the word "and," which in this context carries the same force as the words "I believe." In all cases, however, the division of the creed, according to the persons of God, has been universally recognized by the church. This formula is Trinitarian. That is, it is based on the belief that there is only one God, and that this God exists in three persons, namely the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the same formula we find in

passages like Matthew 28:19, where Jesus gave his disciples this commission:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Here, just as in the *Apostles' Creed*, the mention of these three names together and on equal terms implies that while the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all distinct persons, they are only one God.

Now, admittedly, the *Apostles' Creed* does not specifically mention the word "Trinity," or spell out its details. But remember that the creed was intended to be a summary of beliefs, not a comprehensive statement of faith. And when it was used in the church's liturgy, everyone in the church knew that to mention these three persons of God in this way was to imply the concept of the Trinity.

Now, not every Christian understands the full meaning of the word Trinity, so we should pause to explain it. The Trinity is commonly stated this way:

God has three persons, but only one essence.

By the term person, we mean a distinct, self-aware personality. And by the term essence, we are referring to God's fundamental nature or the substance of which he consists.

Of course, the concept of the Trinity is very difficult for human beings to grasp. God's existence and nature are so far beyond the realm of our experience that it is difficult for us to conceive of him. Even so, the Trinity is one of the most important distinctive beliefs of Christianity. But how did such a complex doctrine become such an important cornerstone in Christian theology?

Well, the Trinity is something you come to when you read the Bible in a holistic way. You come and you see that the Father is clearly God and the Son is clearly God and the Spirit is clearly God in their distinct persons. And so, there's a need to synthesize the teaching of Scripture with something like the doctrine of the Trinity.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

So, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a cornerstone of Christian theology, I take it primarily because it's a biblical doctrine. Now we need to be careful how we understand that because the word "t-r-i-n-i-t-y" is not in Scripture, but the concept is. So, the sum total biblical teaching, what the Scriptures tell us about who God is — that's he's one, that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Spirit is God — when put together in their total, whole Bible package, derives or warrants the conclusion that God is a trinity of persons.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

So, when we say that God consists of one essence, we are defending the biblical truth that there is only one God. And we are trying to explain how three separate persons can all be that one God. We use the term essence to refer to that thing that each of these three persons shares entirely in common with the others, to the *stuff* or *being* that belongs as much to the Father as it does to the Son, and as it does to the Holy Spirit.

And when we say that God exists in three persons, we are defending the biblical truth that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another. They are separate individuals who converse with one another, interact with one another, engage in relationships with one another. In many ways, the concept of the Trinity is a great mystery. But it is also an accurate summary of the Bible's many teachings on the nature of our extraordinary God.

The idea of the Trinity is critical to Christian theology for many reasons. For example, it defends our belief that Jesus is God, and that Jesus is not simply the Father in disguise. It also explains why we affirm monotheism, worshiping only one God, even though we worship and pray to three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, it helps us to give proper honor to all God's persons. And it comforts us with the knowledge that the presence and help of any of God's persons is the presence and help of God himself. In fact, belief in the Trinity is so foundational to so many other Christian ideas that it is hard to imagine historic Christianity without it.

Having looked at the doctrine of God in the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of the Trinity, we are ready to consider the statements it makes about the different persons of God in distinction from each other.

Persons

With regard to the Father, the creed ascribes to him the attribute of being "Almighty," and mentions the historical fact that he is the "Maker of heaven and earth." Now, certainly God has far more attributes than his infinite power and sovereignty, and he has performed more astounding acts than making the world. And in some important senses, the creed's description of the Father doesn't even distinguish Christianity from other religions that might also express belief in a sovereign, divine creator. But the early church felt that these statements were sufficient to demonstrate that a person's beliefs about the Father were compatible with Christianity. And they relied on other statements in the creed to distinguish Christianity from the religions around it.

For instance, the creed has much more to say about the Son, Jesus Christ. Although it does not describe any of his attributes, it mentions several details of his earthly life and ministry — details that would be denied by those outside the church. The creed mentions Jesus' incarnation, his coming to earth as a human baby, and living a genuinely human life. And it speaks of his suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Scripture tells us that unbelievers have denied these basic facts since they took place.

Even today, many liberal historians and theologians deny these facts, as do many Christian cults and false religions. For example, Islam affirms that Jesus was a true prophet of God. But it insists that he was never crucified or resurrected, and it denies his divinity.

Finally, the creed mentions Jesus' role as the one who will judge all humanity on the last day, condemning the wicked, but granting believers eternal, blessed life.

Of the Holy Spirit, the creed says that he caused the Virgin Mary to become pregnant with Jesus. Other than that, it merely affirms his existence as a distinct person of God. Implicitly, however, the creed associates the Holy Spirit with the church, and with our experience of salvation both now and in the future.

We will say much more about each of the persons of God in future lessons. So for now we will simply point out that the creed is concerned not only to affirm Trinitarianism, but also to speak of each person of the Trinity in ways that are central to the Christian faith. While its statements are not extensive, the creed says enough about God and his persons to distinguish those who affirm the historic Christian faith from those who do not.

Now that we have mentioned the doctrinal statements that refer to God himself, we are ready to point out the way the *Apostles' Creed* speaks of the church.

CHURCH

The *Apostles' Creed* describes the church in two different phrases. First, the church is called "the holy catholic church." Second, the church is described as "the communion of saints." These phrases have been interpreted in many different ways, and we will deal with them in greater detail in a future lesson. For now, we will simply point out that the phrase "the holy catholic church" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but to the church in all its parts throughout the world.

Even so, it may seem strange to many Protestants to think about believing in the church in any form. So, it may help to explain that when the creed says "I believe in the ... church," it does not mean that we place our faith in the church. Rather, it means that we affirm the belief that the church is both holy, or "sanctified," and "catholic," meaning universal. And we affirm our belief that there is a communion of saints, that is, a fellowship of believers. It is in these senses that historic Christianity has insisted on the importance of the church.

In this lesson, we will focus on just two aspects of the church that were central to the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. On the one hand, we will look at participation in the church. And on the other hand, we will consider doctrinal preservation by the church. Let's begin with participation in the church.

Participation

When the creed says, "I believe in the holy ... church," it emphasizes the importance of participating in the church. Of course, in the history of the Christian church, there have been many people who wanted to have God as their Father, Jesus as their Lord, and the Holy Spirit as their advocate, but who did not want to be part of the visible church, the gathered people of God. As we read in Hebrews 10:25:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing (Hebrews 10:25).

Even in the first century, some professing believers wanted to avoid the gathered church as a place for worship, teaching and fellowship. But Scripture teaches that the church is important and necessary for Christians. Of course, those who originally used the *Apostles' Creed* were not like this. On the contrary, the creed was used particularly in church services. And it was affirmed by those who came to the church for baptism. They came to be joined to its numbers, to be included in its gatherings. This is the model that the creed puts forth for us to follow.

Even so, in the modern world we still encounter Christians who avoid the church. Perhaps it is because they dislike organized religion. Or maybe they have been mistreated by other Christians. Or perhaps they think that it is sufficient to read Christian books, watch Christian television, and use Christian websites. But the Bible teaches Christians to form an actual, physical community, and it insists that this community is extremely important to every believer. It is not to be limited to spiritual fellowship, although it is true that Christians have spiritual communion with each other through Christ and his Spirit. Rather, our community is to be like a family or neighborhood. It is to consist of people who interact with each other face to face.

With the importance of participation in the church in mind, we should move to doctrinal preservation by and within the church.

Preservation

From the earliest days, the regular recitation, confession and memorization of the creeds and confessions in the church served a very, very important role, especially in societies like the first century world and beyond in early Christianity where the literacy rates were very, very low. And so very few people could read and even among those who could read, very few would ever own a Bible. And so, the regular confession of these creeds publicly in the worship service served again a very important role in providing parameters or what we might call “the rule of faith” or a ruled reading for what is a proper understanding of how the Scriptures are to be put together.

— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

As we mentioned when we spoke of rules of faith, the church is not infallible. And the *Apostles' Creed* is not encouraging us to believe whatever our local church teaches. Rather, it's simply affirming the fact that Christ appointed his church in part to protect and to proclaim the gospel and other truths. Listen to the way Jude, the brother of Jesus, wrote about the church's mission in verses 3-4 of his epistle:

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men ... have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God

into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 3-4).

According to Jude, part of the church's job is to contend for the faith, to protect the truths and beliefs that have been entrusted to it against those who promote false teachings and practices.

Now, it should be obvious to most of us that there are many false teachings in various parts of the church today. And there are many sinful practices as well. Nevertheless, God has never withdrawn the church's assignment, or declared that any other group or individual should take over the job of protecting true doctrine. It is still the job of the church to protect the truth.

And the church is still trying to do its job. Sometimes we do it better than others. Some of our theology is faithful to Scripture, but other parts of it need to be improved, or even changed altogether. And this will always be the case. But for our purposes in this lesson, the point we want to make is this: We can't give up. We have to keep trying to preserve doctrine in the church. And if we abandon this call, we are denying a central article of the historic Christian faith: I believe in the ... church.

Now that we have looked at the articles of faith related to God and the church, we are ready to turn to our third category: the statements about salvation that are presented in the *Apostles' Creed*.

SALVATION

The *Apostles' Creed* contains a lot about salvation near the end. Some people have wondered why they are at the end, rather than some other place. And, of course, the creed itself doesn't really tell us. But, if you look at it, the way that it looks to me, is that the creed wants to establish the Godhead — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — to be sure that the experience of salvation is flowing from that Godhead, and not from any kind of human construct or human system. To know who God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is leads to the invitation and the promise that we can be saved if we confess our sins. And so I think those statements are at the end to show that the fruit of our relationship with God comes from the root of who God is in that Trinity.

— Dr. Steve Harper

The last three articles of faith in the creed deal with aspects of salvation. Specifically, they mention the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. In traditional systematic theology, resurrection and everlasting life are also treated under the heading of eschatology, the doctrine of last things. But for the sake of simplicity, we will only address them under the heading of salvation.

All Christians believe in the forgiveness of sins through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We believe that if we confess and repent of our sins, God will not punish us in

hell for them. And as the *Apostles' Creed* indicates, this has been the belief of the church from its earliest days. And we all know Scriptures that teach us that all those who are forgiven are blessed with eternal life through Jesus Christ. For instance, John 3:16-18 encourages us with these words:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life... Whoever believes in him is not condemned (John 3:16-18).

Eternal life belongs to every believer. In some respects, it begins the moment we come to faith, since our souls are given new life and will never die. But the nature of the eternal life affirmed by the creed sometimes surprises modern Christians. Specifically, the creed speaks about the resurrection of the dead. Sometimes, Christians make the mistake of thinking that the creed is referring to the resurrection of Jesus. But it is not. Jesus' resurrection is mentioned earlier in the creed, in the words "The third day he rose ... from the dead." This article of faith is not repeated.

Rather, when the creed speaks of the resurrection of the dead, it is referring to the biblical teaching that all people will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment, and that they will go to their eternal fates, not as disembodied spirits, but as physical, bodily creatures. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture, and it has been an article of faith in the church for thousands of years. As Jesus taught in John 5:28-29:

A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [the Son's] voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

The creed's statements about salvation are taught clearly in Scripture and have always been embraced by biblical churches. Even so, many modern people who claim to follow Christ reject these basic, fundamental teachings. There are some who deny that God holds us accountable for our sin, and who insist that forgiveness is unnecessary. There are unbelievers in our churches who teach that this life is all there is, and that any so-called "eternal" life we possess is limited to our time on earth in our physical bodies. And there are many who wrongly believe that we will spend eternity as disembodied spirits in heaven. For reasons like these, the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* are just as important and relevant for the church today as they were in the early centuries.

In summary, the *Apostles' Creed* focuses on doctrines related to God, the church, and salvation. In other lessons in this series, we will explore each of these concepts in much greater depth. But for now, we simply want to make sure that we understand the big picture — that this handful of doctrines is so central and fundamental that they have effectively defined the boundaries of Christianity for hundreds and hundreds of years.

So far in our discussion of the *Apostles' Creed* as the articles of faith, we have spoken of the history of the creed, and offered an overview of its theology. Now, we're ready to move to our third major topic: the continuing importance of the articles of faith listed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

IMPORTANCE

We will mention three aspects of the importance of the doctrinal statements in the *Apostles' Creed*. First, we will explain that these teachings are foundational to the rest of Christian theology. Second, we'll talk about the universal affirmation of these teachings throughout the church. And third, we'll speak of the unifying nature of these articles of faith. Let's begin by exploring the foundational qualities of the doctrines in the *Apostles' Creed*.

FOUNDATIONAL

Most people are familiar with the idea that large buildings need solid foundations. The foundation is the base on which the rest of the building is created. It is the anchor that holds the building firmly in place, and that provides strength and stability for the entire structure. In Ephesians 2:19-21, Paul spoke of the church as a building founded on the apostles and prophets. Listen to his words there:

You are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:19-21).

Without a solid, true foundation, the church could not be built in a way that honored God. And in a similar way, Christian theology must be founded on true doctrines and principles if it is to honor God and be useful to his people. Just as Jesus is the cornerstone of the church, his teachings are the cornerstone of theology. And just as the apostles and prophets became the church's foundation by introducing Christ to the world, the *Apostles' Creed* is foundational to theology because it introduces us to the teachings of the apostles recorded in Scripture.

The beautiful thing about the *Apostles' Creed* is that it summarizes so well basic, essential Christian doctrines that every Christian, in all of the diverse denominations that we have today, must affirm: who God is, who the Lord Jesus Christ is, the work of the Spirit and how that works itself out in the doctrine of salvation, the church, all the way to final judgment and then the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot really have the Christian faith without these key, essential Christian doctrines.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

We will consider the foundational nature of the *Apostles' Creed* in two parts. First, we will look at how it provides a standard against which other doctrines can be judged. And second, we will speak of the way that it serves as the logical basis on which

other true doctrines are built. Let's begin with the *Apostles' Creed* as a theological standard.

Standard

The *Apostles' Creed* functions as a doctrinal standard because it presents several of the biggest, most important ideas of Christianity. These ideas are taught so clearly in Scripture that they should be recognized and embraced by everyone. As we said earlier in this lesson, these teachings are essential to Christianity. As a result, every other doctrine that we embrace must be compatible with these teachings. We cannot accept any idea that contradicts these essential teachings.

Have you ever seen a ventriloquist? A ventriloquist is a performer who can speak in a way that makes it look like he is not speaking. Ventriloquists often perform with puppets, making it look like the puppet is carrying on a conversation with the ventriloquist. A skilled performer can make the puppet seem almost as if it were alive. But no matter how convincing the performance is, we know that it is really the ventriloquist who is speaking and not the puppet. Why?

Well, the answer is simple. We know that puppets aren't alive, and that they can't really talk. So, when we observe a puppet that appears to talk, we judge our experience by the standard of what we know to be true. No matter how much it looks like the puppet is talking, our standard tells us that the appearance is deceptive. And so we refuse to believe it. We may not be able to explain how the puppet can appear to be alive and to speak its mind. But we know that there must be a logical explanation that is consistent with our standard.

In a similar way, the *Apostles' Creed* summarizes those central beliefs that we hold so strongly that we will never change them. We believe that the Bible is so clear on these points, and that they are so important, that we cannot compromise on them. So, no matter what other perspectives people present to us, we refuse to believe anything that conflicts with these central teachings of Scripture.

Using the creed as a standard helps us remain faithful to Scripture when convincing false teachers present us with bad theology. Many of us have met people who are so good with their arguments, and who are so compelling as individuals, that we are inclined to believe most things they say — even when they are mistaken or lying. So, it helps to have a short list of essential beliefs that can anchor us to the teachings of Scripture. And the *Apostles' Creed* provides such an anchor.

For example, there were several major heresies that the church responded to in the early centuries of its life. And one of these was Gnosticism. Among other things, Gnosticism taught that our physical bodies are evil, and that salvation involves freeing our souls from their imprisonment in our bodies. Now, not every Christian in the early church knew how to refute this error. But those who had been trained in the doctrines of the *Apostles' Creed* could confidently reject this heresy on the basis that Scripture teaches the resurrection of the body. That is, it teaches that Jesus came to redeem us as whole persons, including not only our souls, but also our bodies.

Many of us have been confused by a clever argument, or misled by mistaken or misrepresented data. Now, we can't always explain what is wrong with these arguments

and findings. But even so, we can confidently reject those things that contradict the *Apostles' Creed*, because we know that the creed is faithful to Scripture.

Of course, we never want to raise the *Apostles' Creed* or any other statement of faith to the level of Scripture. The Bible alone is absolutely unquestionable. And even the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* should be rejected if they can be shown to contradict Scripture. But the *Apostles' Creed* has stood the test of time since the earliest centuries of the church. It has been shown repeatedly to be an accurate representation of the Bible. So, we should feel confident using it as a standard for judging the many doctrines we encounter in the modern world.

Having considered the way the *Apostles' Creed* can serve as a useful doctrinal standard, we are ready to talk about another of its foundational aspects: its use as the logical basis for other theological viewpoints.

Logical Basis

The logical relationship between ideas is similar to the relationship between a river and its headwater or source. Logically basic ideas are like the river's headwater. They are the source of other ideas. And logically dependent ideas are like the river that naturally flows from that headwater. So, when we say that one idea serves as the logical basis for another, we mean that we can create a reasonable argument that moves from the logically basic idea to the establishment of other ideas that are logically dependent. For instance, the *Apostles' Creed* says very few things explicitly about God the Father. All it says is:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

But these doctrines form the logical basis for many other things we believe about the Father. For instance, on the basis that God is the maker of heaven and earth, we also rightly believe that he has authority over heaven and earth, and that the original creation was good, and that we can learn things about God by looking at the natural world.

We can illustrate the value of logically basic doctrines by looking at a tree. We might think of the ground itself as Scripture, with the tree of theology growing out of it. The trunk of the tree, and its major branches, represent the most basic doctrines. These are based on and dependent on Scripture alone. But as the major branches divide into more and smaller branches, they move to beliefs that logically flow from the larger branches. And as we look at the leaves on the tree, we are looking at ideas that depend on the smaller branches. When we picture it this way, the value of beginning with the *Apostles' Creed* becomes clear. We need to learn the big doctrines first, to get the shape of the tree in place, and firmly rooted in Scripture.

This does two things for us. First, it helps us see the relationship between the various different beliefs in our theological systems. And second, it helps us think about doctrines that are more remote from Scripture in ways that harmonize these less-central ideas with our fundamental beliefs.

The doctrines in the *Apostles' Creed* crystallize the essence of Christian truth. The *Apostles' Creed* dates really from the second century; it took a number of forms in the second century, and finally took the form that we are used to. And there you have the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There you have the incarnation and the atoning death and the triumphant resurrection and forthcoming return of the Lord Jesus. There you have the forgiveness of sins. There you have the reality of the church as the fellowship of those who are born again in Christ. And I think that there could be nothing really healthier in any church than periodically to work over the *Apostles' Creed* and highlight those doctrines.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

Now that we have looked at the importance of the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of its foundational nature, we are ready to describe the universal affirmation of its teachings.

UNIVERSAL

One way that we judge the truth of facts is by looking at what different witnesses have to say. The more witnesses that point to the truth of an idea, the more likely we are to believe it. Well, the same thing is true in theology. As we try to determine what we should believe, it helps to know what other people throughout history have believed, as well as what people in the modern world believe. And when it comes to the *Apostles' Creed*, its doctrinal statements have always been affirmed by most Christians in most places.

We will explore the universal nature of the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* in three historical periods. First, we will see that these beliefs are grounded in the New Testament. Second, we will see that they have been affirmed by most Christians throughout church history. And third, we'll look at the ways they continue to characterize the church in the present. Let's begin with the New Testament, and its consistent affirmation of these doctrines.

New Testament

From the earliest days of the church, there have been disagreements over the teaching of Christ and of the apostles. Some of these disagreements have arisen outside the church, while others have come from within the church. For instance, Paul frequently wrote against the Jewish Christians who demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised, as in Galatians 5. And in 2 Peter 2, Peter warned that there would be false teachers in the church. The New Testament is full of examples of Jesus and the apostles correcting the mistaken ideas of various people.

And errors in the church are dangerous when critical beliefs are at stake. This is why Jesus and the authors of the New Testament were so concerned to correct errors on

fundamental points of theology. And the remarkable thing is that as they offered their corrections, they agreed entirely with each other. Despite the many false teachings that existed in the church at this time, the New Testament exhibits unfailing doctrinal unity with itself.

The fact that the church established a canon made up of these books — which by the way took the church centuries actually to do, so it wasn't just a quick process — indicates that the considered judgment of the church is that there is a core of unity here. That's not a consideration that we can easily pass off, and as a matter of fact, that has been the judgment of scholars within the church over the last 2000 years. And yet, while we can talk about a core of unity between the New Testament documents, you do have to acknowledge that there are differences in perspective between them. I think the operative issue is that the differences of perspectives do not actually come down to a contradiction of doctrinal assertions. You get different perspectives, different emphasis, different ways of talking about the reality, different aspects of the reality. But, in my judgment at least, there is no blatant contradiction between the various books of the New Testament.

— Dr. David R. Bauer

In light of this unity, when the New Testament affirms the articles of faith listed in the *Apostles' Creed*, it is fair to say that it does so universally. It consistently argues for the divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while at the same time insisting that there is only one God. The Gospels present the creedal facts of Christ's conception, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. And the books of the New Testament entirely support the creed's statements about the church and salvation.

Having looked at the New Testament, let's see how these beliefs have universally characterized Christianity throughout church history.

Church History

Just like the church in the New Testament, the church of later centuries exhibited a variety of theologies. On many minor issues, there was very little unity. But the more central doctrines, such as the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*, were received and affirmed almost universally. And in those cases where these fundamental beliefs were rejected, the church and history have largely counted the dissenters as schismatics and false teachers.

As just one example, consider the events of the fourth century A.D. The earliest versions of the *Apostles' Creed* were already in use at this time. At this point in history, several heresies arose that the church dealt with in its councils. Some of these were local councils, but others were considered to be ecumenical because they included bishops from most parts of the church throughout the world. For instance, the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 were ecumenical councils

dealing with issues related to several of the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*.

The modern *Nicene Creed* was initially drafted at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and it reached its modern form at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. It is largely an expansion and explanation of the *Apostles' Creed*, intended to clarify several of its ideas for the sake of denying false interpretations of the creed.

For instance, the heresy known as Gnosticism taught that the God of the Bible that created the world had himself been created by another god. Heresies like Gnosticism were not explicitly condemned by the *Apostles' Creed*, so the *Nicene Creed* added language to make the intent of the *Apostles' Creed* clearer. Specifically, where the *Apostles' Creed* merely said "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," the *Nicene Creed* offered this expanded statement: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. Notice four things here:

First, the *Nicene Creed* is based on the *Apostles' Creed*. By basing their own creed on the *Apostles' Creed*, the ecumenical Nicene Council demonstrated that the church universally affirmed the *Apostles' Creed*.

Second, the *Nicene Creed* began with the word "we" in place of the word "I." Whereas the *Apostles' Creed* had been intended as an individual's profession of faith at baptism, the *Nicene Creed* was a statement that the church universally and collectively endorsed these same doctrines.

Third, the *Nicene Creed* offered a clarification by adding the word "one" before the word "God." This made explicit what the *Apostles' Creed* had implied: that there is only one God.

And fourth, the *Nicene Creed* offered the clarification that God created everything, including invisible things such as spirits. This made it clear that God himself was not created. Again, this point was implicit in the *Apostles' Creed*, so that the *Nicene Creed* was simply clarifying the matter.

These types of affirmations and clarifications continued to be offered by other councils and theologians throughout the centuries. At times, the decisions of councils were not accepted by all churches. One council would condemn the views of some churches; another council would condemn the views of other churches. But in most cases, the churches on both sides of these controversies continued to affirm the basic principles of the *Apostles' Creed*.

For this reason, the *Apostles' Creed* has commonly been viewed as the most basic and most ecumenical statement of the Christian faith. Only the *Nicene Creed* has approached the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of ecumenical acceptance throughout history. But the *Nicene Creed* is not nearly as basic. It includes several theological statements that even theologians often misunderstand. This is why we have chosen the *Apostles' Creed* as the foundation for this study of the central tenets of the Christian faith.

So far, we have indicated the New Testament's universal agreement with the *Apostles' Creed*, and mentioned the acceptance of its doctrines throughout church history. Now we are ready to speak of the present, noting that these same beliefs still characterize the Christian church.

Present

In every age, false teachers have denied basic beliefs that the church has held for centuries. In the modern world, cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons consider themselves to be Christians because they accept the Bible and attempt to follow Christ in some manner. But they are not truly Christian because they deny basic beliefs that have defined the boundaries of Christianity for two thousand years — beliefs that can be found in the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. Even some churches that are not recognized as cults deny similarly basic teachings, as do certain individual teachers within Christian churches.

But if so many people reject doctrines listed in the *Apostles' Creed*, how can we say that the creed universally characterizes the church today? Well, the answer is twofold. For one thing, the vast majority of churches that claim to be Christian affirm these doctrines. They are taught and believed by conservative Protestants of all types, including Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and so on. They are also affirmed by larger non-Protestant churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Besides this, churches that deny these doctrines probably shouldn't be called "Christian." While they may endorse the Bible and claim to follow Christ, they do not actually embrace the teachings of Scripture or of the historic church. And because of this, they are not genuinely Christian.

Well, when you think about the importance of the doctrines that are expressed in the *Apostles' Creed*, for instance, these things are utterly essential to the life of the church and our understanding of the nature of the gospel and our understanding of our own salvation in Christ. For instance, the creeds announce to us the Triune nature of God — God is Father, God is Son, and God is Holy Spirit. So, if we're going to be Christian, we can't pretend as though the doctrine of the Trinity is some nice little extra coating on our faith, as though it gives it an extra little "zing" of some kind. Instead, the doctrine of the Trinity is a statement about who our God, in his essence, truly is.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

I would say the doctrines in the *Apostles' Creed* are essential and basic to Christianity. And indeed, if you veer away from them, you're departing from the historic Christian faith. That's the experience of the early church. They discovered there were all kinds of different ways in which the Bible could be interpreted and they said, "this is the correct way." It's like a railway track — "This is the correct groove in which to interpret the Bible. Go this way and you're departing from the essential Christian faith." And so, to this day the *Apostles' Creed*, I think, defines the essential nature of authentic Biblical faith.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Because the beliefs summarized in the *Apostles' Creed* are so foundational and universal, they exert a unifying influence among believers. This is particularly valuable today because there is so much division in the modern church.

UNIFYING

Maybe you have met sincere Christians who resist learning theology because they are convinced that doctrine only divides Christians against each other. They spread this resistance to formal theology with slogans like: "Jesus unites us, but doctrine divides us." And there is a measure of truth in this position. Christians throughout the ages have separated from each other, condemned each other, persecuted each other and even waged wars over doctrinal matters. Even so, the New Testament still encourages the church to strive for doctrinal unity.

For instance, in Ephesians 4:11-13, we read these words:

[Jesus] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers ... so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

In this passage, Paul referred to the church as the body of Christ. And he indicated that the church cannot reach maturity in Christ until we are united in faith and in knowledge. For this reason, doctrinal unity should be the goal of every Christian.

Of course, many other aspects of our Christian life should influence our study of doctrine. We need to do things like love God and our neighbors, pursue holiness, rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, and meditate on God and his word. When we simply focus on doctrine and ignore other concerns, we often go badly astray. As the apostle Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

If I ... can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

As this verse and many others indicate, gaining theological knowledge is important, but it is not the greatest good of Christian faith. One of the most effective ways to avoid the destructive consequences of theological controversy is to delight in the doctrinal unity we share with all followers of Christ around the world. When we balance our concern for the details of theology with a proper concern for unity, doctrine can actually unite us rather than divide us.

The Church of Jesus Christ today is quite concerned about unity. We have so many denominations and different points of view on the Holy Spirit, on women, on baptism. Yet it seems that today in the twenty-

first century we are more concerned about getting together on the basis of action, reaching the world, rather than on the basis of the truth. It is very interesting that our Lord Jesus and also the apostle Paul, when they think of unity — I'm thinking of the Gospel of John 17 and Ephesians 4 — that they're thinking about the unity that we have because of our one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism. And so, it is the truths, or the body of truth that we believe in, that needs to be the foundation of our unity in Christ.

— Dr. Samuel Ling

Throughout the world there are hundreds of millions of true followers of Christ who stand firmly committed to the central biblical teachings expressed in the *Apostles' Creed*. In fact, at this very moment countless Christians suffer persecution and even martyrdom for these commitments. They may disagree with us about a number of other theological issues. In fact, they may object strongly to viewpoints that you and I hold dear. But despite our differences, we stand together in what the creed says about God, the church, and salvation. Remember what Jesus prayed for the church in John 17:23:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:23).

Notice that Jesus said that unity in the church was proof that he had been sent by the Father. When we stand shoulder to shoulder with other followers of Christ, stressing what we have in common theologically, we testify to the world that the gospel is true, and this empowers our evangelism.

Having defined the gospel and having agreed on the common ground of the gospel, I think one way that we can pursue unity and truth is to say that we are so committed to that unity that we have in the gospel, that we are going to pursue unity with one another, in life and ministry, in such a way that we do not ask one another to relinquish our convictions of truth. But we in fact celebrate even those areas in which we differ from one another. We differ from one another respectfully. We differ from one another intelligently. We differ from one another lovingly. But we look for things in one another that we have mutual joy in, at the truth and convictional level. And we celebrate those things to a certain extent, so that the unity is enjoyed and so that we can have legitimate, conscientious differences in other areas of our theological convictions.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The *Apostles' Creed* can help Christians everywhere to differentiate between essential beliefs and beliefs that are of secondary importance. As we stress this creed in our personal lives and in the corporate life of the church, we will find that theology

doesn't necessarily divide us from each other. Instead, we'll find ourselves uniting with other faithful servants of Christ, and thereby fulfilling Jesus' own vision for his church.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson introducing the articles of faith of the *Apostles' Creed*, we have spoken of the history of the creed in terms of its development and purpose. We have provided an overview of its doctrines in terms of God, the church, and salvation. And we have mentioned the importance of its articles of faith in terms of their foundational, universal, and unifying nature.

The *Apostles' Creed* is an extremely important historical document that has summarized central Christian beliefs for hundreds and hundreds of years. Even today, it continues to offer a unified starting point for Christian theologians in every denomination. In the lessons that follow in this series, we will explore the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* in greater detail, looking at how they represent the truths of Scripture that unify Christian teaching throughout the world.

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GLOSSARY

Apostles, the – Jesus' original 12 disciples

apostolic/apostolical – Of or relating to the Apostles

Augustine – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

Basil of Caesarea – (A.D. 330-379) Bishop of Caesarea elected in A.D. 370 who defended the Scriptures as the final authority in doctrine

catholic – Term meaning "universal"; used in the Apostles' Creed to describe the church as including all believers, from all places, throughout all of history

Christ – From the Greek word "*christos*" meaning "the anointed" or "anointed one"; closely tied to the Old Testament Hebrew term "messiah"

Cyprian – (ca. A.D. 200-258) Bishop of Carthage in the third century who wrote that traditional teachings of the church should not have more authority than the Scriptures

Docetists – Heretical sect that denied Christ's humanity and taught that Christ only appeared to be human but did not have a real, physical body

ecclesiastical – Relating to the church, especially as an established institution

eternal life – To know God and live forever in the full blessing of God

Gnosticism – Early heresy from the first centuries after Christ; believed that material things were evil, including the human body; therefore, God would never take on the form of human flesh, so Jesus was not both God and man

Hippolytus – (ca. A.D. 170-236) Theologian from Rome who wrote *Against the Heresy of One Noetus* in which he defended the Scriptures as the final authority in doctrine

Irenaeus – (ca. A.D. 130-202) Second-century bishop and early Christian writer who wrote *Against Heresies* in which he refuted Gnosticism and affirmed the validity of the four gospels

Islam – Monotheistic religion of Muslims that adheres to the words and teachings of Muhammad; believes, among other things, that Jesus was a true prophet of God, but he was not crucified or, resurrected or divine

Nicene Creed – Creed written by a council held in Nicaea in A.D. 325; an expansion of the Apostles' Creed that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and refuted Arianism

Origen – (ca. A.D. 185-254) Early Christian theologian from Alexandria; his works include: *On First Principles*, in which he defended the Scriptures as our final authority for Christian doctrine, and the *Hexapla*, a comparative study of various translations of the Old Testament

Roman Creed/Old Roman Creed – A creed used in the church of Rome in the early centuries after Christ; most likely the predecessor to the Apostles' Creed

salvation – Deliverance from the tyranny of evil and from God's judgment against sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

sola Scriptura – Latin phrase meaning "Scripture alone"; the belief that the Scriptures stand as the supreme and final judge of all theological questions; one of the basic principles of the Reformation

theology – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

Trinity – Theological term used to express the fact that God is one essence in three persons