

COMMON GROUND

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What All Christians Believe and Why It Matters

KEITH DRURY

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To Paul Kind and Mark Schmerse,
Companions on the trail and in the church

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Writing a book on the Apostles' Creed is harder than it sounds. I am neither a theologian nor a Bible scholar. I am a minister, and teach practical ministry to ministerial students. Yet over the years, I have come to see the importance of the core Christian doctrines upon which we all agree—the unchanging things.

Several years ago, I began researching for this book, and today I am turning in the nineteenth draft. It still is not a perfect book, but it would not be even what it is now without the help of dedicated and generous scholars who have read and reviewed the manuscript—some of them several times over. I offer grateful thanks to theologian Chris Bounds for reading the manuscript in its earliest stages and offering corrections and suggestions—especially on important strains of thought I had omitted. Bible scholars Ken Schenck, David Smith, and Steve Lennox offered helpful insights from a biblical perspective that I would never have seen on my own and that did not emerge even from my extensive research. Scientist Burt Webb helped me with technical foundations of chapter 2. Tamara Bounds read the manuscript as a layperson and

offered a host of suggestions to make the book more readable and understandable. Larry Wilson, my editor, suggested numerous structural changes that improved the work considerably, along with offering superb editing of the final draft.

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Along with assistance gained from these people, I received help from a number of good books. There are dozens of great books on the Apostles' Creed, and I studied many of them in my year of research before writing. Most Christian thinkers (and almost all theologians) have written on the creeds. Augustine's *Sermon to Catechumens* and his *Treatise on Faith and the Creed* were seminal—both for the church and for me. Thomas Aquinas gave a series on the creed shortly before his death, and they were extremely insightful (“The Sermon-conferences of St. Thomas on the Apostles' Creed”). In Martin Luther's *Large Catechism* I found the most concentrated teaching on the creed. He packed more great ideas in fewer words than anyone I read. Karl Barth's early work, *Dogmatics in Outline*, offered deep insights as always. I also studied more recent writers' works on the creeds, notably Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Creed*, which helped me see the creeds in light of today's world. Hans Urs von Balthasar's

Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed inspired me to reflect on love as God's motivation for His work and in theology. These were primary influences on my writing.

Besides these primary works, I should acknowledge several other books, including Alister McGrath's *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed*, Wolfhart Pannenberg's *The Apostles' Creed in Light of Today's Questions*, William Barclay's bulky writing in *The Apostles' Creed*, Emil Brunner's sermons on the creed published as *I Believe in the Living God*, Roger Van Harn's *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, and a recent work for younger readers by Ray Pritchard titled *Credo: Believing in Something to Die For*. These books combined to keep me within the circle of common ground where Christians agree. Thank you to both my scholarly colleagues who read the manuscript and to these brilliant Christian writers who inspired me as I read and wrote. Writing this book led me to greater devotion and worship. I hope reading it will do the same for you.

KEITH DRURY
March 8, 2008

WHY WE STUDY THE APOSTLES' CREED



This book is for Christians who seldom recite the creed in worship, never learned the creed, or cannot repeat it without reading the words from a book or worship folder. This book is written with the conviction that our beliefs are important and ought to be studied—especially those beliefs that form the common ground we hold with all Christians past and present. So if you come from a non-creedal tradition, here are several reasons why it is important for you to understand the creeds in general and the Apostles' Creed in particular.

THE CREED UNDERLINES THE BIBLE

Creeds do not replace the Bible but underscore its essential doctrines. They highlight the most important doctrines in the Bible—upon which we all agree.

Not all Bible verses are of equal weight. For example, there are more verses about speaking in tongues than on the virgin birth, but that does not mean speaking in tongues is more important than the

virgin birth. We do not get our doctrine using arithmetic to add up the verses on a particular subject and calculate what matters most. The Holy Spirit guided early Christians to recognize certain core doctrines and put them into a creed. The Apostles' Creed reminds us of the most vital doctrines in the Bible. It is doctrinal concentrate.

In later creeds, the church became more talkative. This book focuses primarily on the Apostles' Creed, though it sometimes refers to the more intricate Nicene Creed to expand and explain the shorter Apostles' Creed. The creeds are a sort of theological *Reader's Digest* that underscores the most important doctrines of the Bible.

Knowing the core claims of Christianity should be important to Christians.

THE CREED STATES MINIMUM BELIEFS

14 The creeds are sparse and thus provide a statement of the minimum beliefs for a Christian. The creeds leave out many doctrines that are the specialties of various denominations. That is the genius of the creeds: they provide us with the bare minimum of Christian belief. You can be a Christian and not accept the doctrines of eternal security or speaking in tongues or entire sanctification, but you cannot be a Christian and reject the core doctrines in the creeds. Every Christian ought to believe more than what is stated in the Apostles' Creed; however, no Christian

should believe less. We should study the creed to remind ourselves of the core beliefs upon which all Christians agree—the minimum belief required to call oneself Christian.

THE CREED DEFINES HERESY

The creeds both provide the inner core of doctrine and define the outer limits of beliefs. They delineate what is doctrinally out-of-bounds. If a person says, “I think Jesus never really came back from the dead—he just was in a coma,” the Apostles’ Creed sets off an alarm bell among Christians. We disagree about lots of things in the Bible, and we are generous to those with whom we differ. However, we fully agree about the statements in the creed. When someone rejects a creedal doctrine, we are not supposed to be casual about it. Doctrine matters, especially core doctrine. The creed is our referee on the playing field of theology. With so many secular books and television shows focusing on religious issues, we need to know the doctrinal boundaries so we can identify heresy and hold tightly to the sound doctrines of the Bible.

15

THE CREED UNITES US

Creeds emphasize our common ground with other Christians. Baptists, Wesleyans, and Roman Catholics disagree on many things, but we unanimously agree on the creeds. Denominations tend to

emphasize their differences with one another, which presents a divided front to the world. The world says, “You can’t even agree among yourselves; how can you talk to us about truth?” However, we do agree on the vital doctrines in the creeds. So studying the Apostles’ Creed helps us emphasize our common beliefs to the world—and to ourselves. Studying the creeds is unifying.

THE CREED HAS A LONG HISTORY

The creeds are our anchor to the historic Christian faith. The Apostles’ Creed probably began as a list of questions asked of baptismal candidates. However, such an affirmation of faith needed to be more than a once-for-all-time statement reserved for new believers. So Christians began repeating the creed every week as part of worship. Most have done so ever since, with some modern-day exceptions. The Nicene Creed came later and is the earliest official creed established at a universal council of the church. It expands and adds detail to the core statements in the simpler Apostles’ Creed.

16 The Apostles’ Creed is more popular and easier to memorize; it is the shortest full-length creed. Its origin has been attributed to the apostles, but that is unlikely. The Apostles’ Creed did originate very early in the church’s history and essentially represents what the apostles taught and wrote in the Bible. When we study (and recite) the creeds, we remember what Christians have always believed and

avoid cutting ourselves off from two thousand years of orthodox Christianity. Studying the creeds reminds us of the things on which Christians everywhere at all times and in all places agree. The creeds are the roots of our theological family tree.

THE CREED SHOWS US WHAT IS WORTH DYING FOR

The Apostles' Creed reminds us what we are willing to die for. Few of us would allow ourselves to be burned at the stake for the doctrine of eternal security or the right to ordain women. However, we would die before rejecting Jesus Christ as God. The church writes some things in pencil—they are easily erased by the next generations. Other things are written in ink—they are hard to erase because we believe them so strongly. The creeds, however, are written in *blood*. The martyrs died for these beliefs. We would too. The creeds do not change with the winds and whims of the times. If thousands of martyrs have died for these beliefs, we should at least be willing to take some time to study them.

17

THE CREED IS LIFE CHANGING

The creeds are not merely statements of boring doctrine; they affect how we live. Studying the creeds will change the way you live. Revivalist evangelicals rightfully want to avoid becoming a

“dusty, musty, creedal church.” We want a changed life, a vibrant daily walk with God. Yet what we believe affects how we behave.

This book specializes in showing the practical effects of our core beliefs on our daily lives. The closing section of each chapter asks, “So what about us?” If we really believe in everlasting life, it will change how we live this afternoon. Doctrine changes our outlook, our values, our worship, and the way we treat others. The creeds show us God’s great plan of redemption. And the better we know God’s plan of redemption, the better our worship and living will become. The popular saying “It’s the deeds, not the creeds” merely points out that a statement of faith without accompanying action is dead formalism. However, the opposite is also true: deeds without creeds produce empty legalism. If living a good life were all that mattered, Buddhists, cult members, and even some atheists might rate higher than many Christians. But right living alone is not enough. Believing the right things is also important. Christlike living by people who reject Christ will not count in the end. Spirituality without theological content is an empty shell. The Christian religion emphasizes both right beliefs and right behavior. Our deeds show the world how to live, but our creeds show them whom we live for and why. Studying the creeds makes a difference in how we live.

WE RECITE THE CREED TOO SELDOM

The less we say the creeds in worship, the more we ought to study them. Evangelicals have stripped from their worship anything that seems “too Catholic” or “too formal.” Yet we of all people believe that doctrine matters. We do not say, “Believe whatever you want to so long as you are sincere.” We believe that the content of a person’s faith is important. We believe doctrine matters. If we seldom recall our core beliefs by reciting the Apostles’ Creed together in worship, we can at least study it in Sunday school or in small groups so that we will know what beliefs we should hold dear. This book is intended for exactly that use—to study and ponder the core doctrines that form the common ground for all Christians and always have. It is an exciting study, and it will change the way you worship and live.

THE APOSTLES' CREED



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 Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he shall 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.

THE NICENE CREED



We believe in one God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds;
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made;
who for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man,
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried,
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;

and he shall come again with glory to judge both the living
and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord and Giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and
glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church;
We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and we look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

I believe in God the Father Almighty. . . .

—APOSTLES' CREED

1

ALMIGHTY GOD

What I don't get is this: if God is a loving Father who only wants what's best for us, and if he is almighty so he can do anything he wants, then why do bad things like cancer happen to people? It seems like God must be either a loving Father who isn't all that powerful or else an almighty God who isn't all that good.

—KARIN*

The problem of evil arises in the very first phrase of the Apostles' Creed. The creed claims God is both a loving Father and at the same time, he is almighty. How can he be both? We say God is loving, yet we also claim that he can do anything. How can we match this belief about God with our experience of a world in which so many bad things happen?

*Each chapter of this book begins with a quote adapted from a real comment by a college student, Sunday school attendee, or popular book that falls short of orthodoxy. The purpose is to remind us that some doctrinal statements sound quite reasonable yet are unsound biblically and theologically. The intent is not to make fun of any sincere person (the names have been changed in any case) but to show the importance of understanding sound doctrine as outlined in the creed.

We shall address this problem presently, but this initial phrase of the creed is packed with beautiful doctrines, and we will first examine these before asking the hard question about how a loving, all-powerful God could permit evil.

WE BELIEVE

Christians are believers. The word *creed* springs from the first word of the creed itself, the Latin word *credo*, which means “I believe.” Others may scoff at the existence of God and insist that we prove he is real, but we are never able to do so to their satisfaction. We cannot prove God, we believe in God. Certainly, there is ample evidence for God—he has left his fingerprints all over creation. However, we do not have enough evidence to prove this to skeptics beyond all doubt. If we are limited to the human scientific method, the problem of God’s existence will remain unresolved. However, we Christians say God does exist—we *believe* this, which is why we call ourselves believers.

26 Did you collect all the scientific evidence and then make a rational decision about whether or not there is a God? Few do. Most of us came to believe in God by his grace. God revealed himself to us, and we responded and believed. Likewise, we confess our belief and hope others will believe too. Intellectual proofs for God reinforce our faith but do not cause it. Only God causes faith. The atheist says, “There is no God.” We say, “I believe in

God.” Both are statements of faith. We believe that above all and behind all, there is a personal, loving Father. Others ridicule us, saying, “You have never seen this God; how can you say he exists?” We reply, “Credo.” I believe.

WE BELIEVE IN ONE GOD

Christians believe there is only one God. We do not mean that we believe our God is the top God or best God or God-in-chief. We believe he is the only God that exists. The Nicene Creed states it this way: “We believe in one God.” We are saying there is only one true God of the universe. This God is *the* God, this God is the *only* God, and this God is *my* God. We are not saying our God is equal with all the others or even better than the rest; we are saying our God is the one and only God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Creator of heaven and earth.

However, as Augustine pointed out long ago, we are saying more than this. We are not saying merely that we believe God exists or that we believe what God has said; we are saying that we believe *in* God. We trust him. We have invested our lives with God. We have bet our lives for here and for eternity on him. The creed answers the question “Who is God?” God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity. This is not three Gods but one God in three persons. The three sections of the creed declare what we believe about the Trinity.

GOD THE FATHER

If there were a paternity suit filed on behalf of creation, God would be identified as the Father. God is the Father of all. He is seminal. He is the Source of all that is seen and unseen. The early Christians did not choose to start the creed with the statement “I believe in Almighty God.” They stated, “I believe in God the Father Almighty.” The order is important because the fatherhood of God precedes his might. Relationship and love confront us in the very first phrase of the creed.

A PARTICULAR FATHER

Saying God is Father implies that there are children. Yet the term *father* in the creed is not used primarily in reference to us but to God’s Son. When we say, “I believe in God the Father,” we mean one particular father—the Father of Jesus Christ our Lord. This is a statement about the Trinity. Fathering us comes later. So the creed is clarifying what we mean when we use the word *God*. We do not mean the Father alone. Christians believe that God is the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is not three Gods, but one. The Trinity is so hard to get our minds around that we can easily slip into referring to the Father as God and then think of Jesus as something less. Indeed, this was one of the first heresies in the church.

We shall address that later, but at this point we are reminded that the Father spoken of in the creed is the Father of Jesus Christ our Lord. The Christian God is the Holy Trinity.

A Loving Relationship

Using the term *father* to describe God indicates from the start that we have a relationship with him. Where there is a father, there must be children. We are those children. We Christians see God as something more than a distant watchmaker-type creator who designed this complex world, then wound it up and walked away. God the Father is in relationship both with his only Son and with us, his children. While there is truth in the ideas that God is a king and we are his subjects or that God is a judge and we are the accused, we Christians see God primarily as the heavenly Father with us as his children. Some people who have had poor earthly fathers are troubled by this notion. However, God's fatherhood is not merely human fatherhood written in larger letters. God is the original Father from whom all other fathering is derived (and reflects poorly). When we approach the Father, we do so in confidence that God is a person who cares about us and loves us. Christians approach God as *Abba*. God is not an impersonal force or abstract idea but is a father. He is a living, loving person. Thus, God is not distant from us but has chosen to be close to and to care for us—we relate to him intimately. How do we know this? The Bible tells us so.

A New Conception of Sin

Once we understand God as Father, a new conception of sin dawns on us. No longer do we think of sin as exclusively law breaking, as if God were merely a king or a judge. Sin is not so much about violating the law as about breaking a relationship. Sin is more about unreturned love than about broken commandments. Sin is whatever wounds God's heart. All this becomes clear to us when we understand the idea of God as Father.

A Family

When we claim God as Father, it means we have brothers and sisters. God's family is large. When we were adopted by God, we joined this extended family. He is not my Father only; he is *our* Father. We say so in the prayer Jesus taught us. God expects us to love our brothers and sisters as we love him, for how can we love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen? Christians are family folk, even if we never marry another person. We inherit brothers and sisters to love and care for. We cannot claim to love God any more than we love our brothers and sisters, for Jesus taught us that this exactly how we show our love to God—by loving his other children. The fatherhood of God implies that there must be a family.

Provider

That God is Father reminds us that he is our provider. In most religions, the so-called god demands gifts from worshippers. Yet Christians know that God is the primary gift giver. Sure, we bring offerings to church, and there were offerings and sacrifices stipulated by regulations in the Old Testament; but these are not the core acts of giving in the Christian religion. It is God who performs the core giving acts in our religion. God is the number one giver. He is Jehovah Jireh—the Father-Provider. He cares for us.

All that we have can be traced upstream to our Father. He is the Source. This is called *providence*. God gives us life, a spouse, a house, a car, and our next breath. He gave us the sun and moon and the stars and seasons and mountains. Everything we have is a gift from God. He is the provider and sustainer of life. However, even these are not his greatest gifts. God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son. Jesus Christ is God's greatest gift because he provided for our salvation. This is the God we Christians bet our lives on—the Father and giver of life. While it is true that we do not get every good thing we ask for, every good thing we do have comes from him.

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Almighty

God the Father is almighty. He can do anything—he is omnipotent. In these later centuries of the Christian faith, Christians can be quite talkative about God's various characteristics, but in the early

days they simply said he was almighty. God has all ability. He can do whatever he wants unless self-limited by his own will or character. The term *almighty* includes God's eternity, his infinity, and all the omni- words we use to describe him, like omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. When the angel Gabriel visited Mary to announce that she would bear a child, even though she was a virgin, she asked, "How can this be?" We all need to hear Gabriel's response. He said, "Nothing is impossible with God." As the old song goes, God can do anything but fail.

This almighty God is the ruler of all creation. He existed before creation—before time itself. Our almighty God is above all laws of nature, and he cannot be arrested for any act. He stands before no court and answers to no one. He has all power, all knowledge, all might. He can do what he wishes. He could cast all of us into hell and nobody could complain. Yet this almighty, fearsome God has chosen to be our loving Father! God could have chosen not to love us, but he didn't. He chose to love. And he acted on that choice by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die and rise again for us and our salvation.

32

LOVING FATHER VERSUS ALMIGHTY KING

So which is it—is God more of a loving Father or an almighty king? The question that introduced this chapter is a serious puzzle. If God is indeed a loving Father, why do so many bad things happen?

If this loving God is all powerful, why would he let people die of cancer? If God could have stopped terrorists from blowing up the building where your husband worked, why didn't he? It seems like we end up with either a loving Father who is weak and cannot stop evil or an almighty God who is unloving. Either portrait of God is repellant: an ineffectual father or a cruel tyrant. Theologians call this the "problem of evil."

Solutions to the Problem of Evil

There are answers to this dilemma, of course. An answer to the problem of evil is called a *theodicy*. Many books have been written on the subject, but we will mention only a few of the answers that have been offered throughout history.

We might say that God set into motion certain laws of nature and now lets nature run its course. When a child falls from a tree, the laws of gravity play out and God does not interfere. When automobiles crash into one another, our human bodies are subject to these laws of nature and God does not interrupt. Or we might say that God has limited his will by allowing humans to make certain choices. Using that free will, they sometimes choose to strap bombs to themselves and blow up children in the marketplace, and God does not overrule their free will even when it is used to do harm. Or we might say that sin reigns on earth, at least for the time being; and wars, disease, and death are the result of the sin God has not yet destroyed. We might even say that our time on

earth is but a moment compared to eternity, so any pain we experience here is irrelevant compared to the glory of the next life—like pain in childbirth. We could go so far as to say that suffering is not bad at all but is actually good in the upside-down kingdom of God.

These are some of the answers people have thought of for the problem of evil, but they all seem to leave us with more questions.

Inscrutable

Perhaps the problem of evil is not solvable because God's ways are unknowable. Maybe we would not understand the answer to our question even if God did try to explain it to us. The ways of God are sometimes a mystery—he is inscrutable. Just because God is personal does not mean he can be easily understood. Maybe we will understand all of this when we see him face to face. On the other hand, maybe we will never figure it out, even in heaven. In our creeds, we do not explain things; we confess them. We do not comprehend them fully even though we believe them. Who knows the ways of God? Here on earth we know in part because we see through a glass dimly. We do our best to explain this riddle, but we never do so fully. In the poem "The Ancient Sage," Alfred Lord Tennyson put it this way: "For nothing worth proving can be proven, nor yet disproven." Some ways of God we cannot explain. We say God is both all loving and all powerful, yet we cannot fully satisfy our own questions on the matter. Still, we believe. We believe in God the Father Almighty.

Perhaps this is why so many Christians have recited this phrase every week for two thousand years. We confess our faith without sight. We trust without proof. We believe. We know God loves, and we know he can do anything. We just can't explain why he does—or doesn't do, the things we think he should. So until we get fuller answers than these, we simply believe.

WHAT ABOUT US

What shall we say, then? If God the Father Almighty loves us and can do anything, what do we do? We pray. If we did not believe he loved us, we would not ask for any good thing from him. If we did not believe he was almighty, we would have no hope for answered prayer. Yet we do believe that he is both loving and almighty, so we ask. We come before his throne boldly—like sons and daughters approaching our loving heavenly Father. We make our requests known to him and leave it at that. The fact that God does not act in any given situation does not mean that he could not act. He can do anything. We trust his judgment because we believe *in* God. We do not get all the good things we ask for; but we get some good things and we thank God for those. We believe in God regardless of what we receive.

We know, of course, that temporal requests are not all that important anyway. Mostly, we thank God for his greater gifts—salvation and eternal life. Our story does not end here on earth. We look for-

ward to another world that is different and better than this one. Jesus promised this, and we believe him. Even more than this, we are grateful that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Because we have believed in him, we shall not perish but have everlasting life. Even if we never had one other answer to prayer, we have already received the most important one. We confessed our sins, and God was faithful and just and forgave our sins. He adopted us into his family, and we await a glorious future with him forever.

Others may think we are crazy and ask, “Why serve a God who does not pay better? Why serve a God who does not make you rich and give you a painless, healthy life?” Well, sometimes God does those things. But even when our lot in life seems no better than our enemies’, God still gives us joy and satisfaction. Even if we live in daily pain, we will trust him. Why? Because we believe *in* him. We are betting our lives on him. With God, we are “all in.” We have risked everything on his goodness because we know he loves us. After all, he sent his Son to die for us. This God-on-a-cross is worthy of our trust. Amazing love! How can it be?

PRAYER

I believe in you, Father.
You are *my* Father.
The Father of Jesus Christ
who is my brother.
You are Father of my family.
Our Father.
The family of God.

God the Father Almighty.
Above all,
in all,
through all,
able to do anything
but fail.

You care for me.
Provide for me.
Direct me.
And you love me.

I believe in God the Father Almighty.
The loving God.
The God.
The *only* God
Our God.
My God.
I believe.
Amen.