

Creeds: New Testament Beginnings

This is the first sermon of a three-sermon series on “creeds.” Creeds are short summaries of early Christian teaching, of essential Christian belief. According to the early church, what must Christians believe? What truths guided them? What we’re going after here could also be called “theology.” But we will focus on creeds because that’s a better way to find out what early church thought was important.

By “early church” I mean the New Testament churches and also the first few centuries after that. What did *they* think were the important Christian teachings? What they thought was important is a very good way to learn theology.

The creeds were often used at baptism. What did people need to know and believe in order to be baptized? The creeds were used to answer that. That’s not all the creeds were used for. They were also used for worship, and for evangelizing, and to correct bad teaching. Today we will look at the New Testament beginnings. I’m planning next Sunday to speak on the Apostles Creed, and the Nicene Creed on the Sunday after that.

There is a view around that says the earliest churches did not have teachings or doctrine. (“Teaching” and “doctrine” are the same word in Greek.) This view says that they just believed in Jesus and were baptized and then did whatever the Spirit led them to do, and there was no more to it than that at the start.

This is wrong. In January of this year we looked at Luke 24 and Acts 1, “Jesus Prepares Twelve Witnesses.” Jesus carefully prepared the apostles to say the right things about him. Right from the start, there were certain teachings that all believers needed to know.

When Paul met the Lord on the road to Damascus, about four years after Pentecost, there were already teachings that he needed to learn. These were passed on to him, and he passed them on to the churches he planted. Today we will look at that early church teaching. Here are a few lines that talk about this:

“Hold fast to the traditions you were taught by us.” 2 Thess 2:15

“Thanks be to God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over.” Romans 6:17

“I handed on to you as of first importance what I had in turn received.” 1 Corinthians 15:3

“The time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine/teaching.” 2 Timothy 4:3

“[An elder] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine, and refute those who oppose it.” Titus 1:9

Now we’ll look at NT examples of core teaching and belief. We’ll begin with a few short ones.

“Jesus is Lord” – shortest, earliest, most common, most central. Basic criterion for baptism. You could almost boil the whole New Testament down to this: “Here’s why we say ‘Jesus is Lord.’”

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

“If with your mouth you confess ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

“Every tongue will confess that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord.’”

(1 Corinthians 12; Romans 10; Philippians 2)

“Jesus is the Christ.” Matthew 16:16; 1 John 2:22. An important part of preaching to Jews.

“Jesus is the Son of God.” Matthew 16:16; 1 John 4:15

“Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” 1 John 4:2. In the early church, some said that Jesus only looked like a human, but he was really a more spiritual being, and did not come in the flesh.

Now we will read through 13 New Testament paragraphs. These are short, dense summaries of essential Christian belief. The first ones will be teaching about Christ, then about God the Father and Christ the Son, and then about the trinity – Father and Son and Spirit.

Of course you won’t remember everything. But you will see that there are some central teachings that the church was built around, right from the start. And, you will have a general idea what they are. There will be lots of repetition in these paragraphs, saying the same things in different ways. It will be good for us to grasp what teachings have been at the centre from the start.

1 Teachings About Christ

(1) By this gospel you are saved ...

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

that Christ died for our sins

according to the Scriptures,

that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day

according to the Scriptures,

and that he appeared to Cephas (Aramaic for “Peter”)

and then to the Twelve.

Then to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at the same time,

Then he appeared to James, (the Lord’s brother)

then to all the apostles,

and last of all to me.

1 Corinthians 15:2–8 – the gospel, with emphasis on witnesses of the resurrection.

(2) *Paul, ... set apart for the gospel of God,
which he promised beforehand
through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,
concerning his Son,
who was descended from David
according to the flesh (genealogies of Matthew and Luke)
and was appointed the Son of God in power
through the Spirit of holiness
by his resurrection from the dead,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
through whom we have received grace and apostleship
to bring about the obedience of faith
for the sake of his name
among all the nations,
including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*
Romans 1:1–6 – this is the gospel. It mentions Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(3) *For Christ also suffered once for sins,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
to bring you to God. (!!!)
He was put to death in the body
but made alive in the Spirit,
in which he proclaimed to the imprisoned spirits [fallen angels]
Baptism now saves you ...
by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven
and is at God's right hand
with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.*
1 Peter 3:18 – Christ-gospel summary, to prepare us for suffering.

(4) *He appeared in the flesh, (made just like us, tempted just as we are – Hebrews)
was vindicated by the Spirit, (that is, resurrection)
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*
1 Timothy 3:16

2 Father and Son: Binitarian Scriptures

We'll get to the trinity, but most of the New Testament is not Trinitarian, it is Binitarian. It usually talks about the Father and the Son. Early Christian teachings put God and Jesus together, so we would understand how to think of them in relation to each other.

(5) *For there is one God
and one mediator between God and mankind,
the man Christ Jesus,
who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*

1 Timothy 2:5–6. Jesus is the one bridge between God and people. All people are captives needing ransom. Jesus died to pay that ransom. Let's never get used to that.

(6) *There is but one God, the Father,
from whom are all things
and for whom we live;
and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things
and through whom we live.* 1 Corinthians 8:6 – this summary cuts a wide swath.

(7) *In the presence of God
and of Christ Jesus,
who will judge the living and the dead,
and in view of his appearing and his kingdom,
I solemnly urge you ...*
2 Timothy 4:1

(8) *In the sight of God, who gives life to everything,
and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession,
I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame
until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,
which God will bring about in his own time—
God, the blessed and only Ruler,
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
who alone is immortal
and who lives in unapproachable light,
whom no one has seen or can see.
To him be honor and might forever. Amen.*

1 Timothy 6:13–16. Paul's solemn charge to Timothy turns into pure worship.

(9) *The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3.

When Dawson was young he had a friend named Greg. In those days I met Greg's mother once in a while, but I could never remember her name. I called her "Greg's mom." I said, "Hi, Greg's mom, how are you?" In certain circles the most important thing about me is that I am Elyn's father. That's how they know who I am: "Oh, you're Elyn's dad."

We know who God is because we know his Son. “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To figure out who our God is, we start with Jesus. There was a God that Jesus called “God” and that he called “Father.” That’s our God, the one Jesus called “God” and “Father.” God is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

3 Father, Son, and Spirit: Trinitarian Scriptures

The New Testament speaks about God the Father and Jesus the Son much oftener than the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son are each mentioned about five times for each one time Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit. That’s why I say that the New Testament is mostly Binitarian.

And yet the Trinity comes up in many Scriptures. I’ll just give four here. Jesus’ line, “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” is the most explicit, but these others happen often enough to show us that the apostles and earliest churches knew their God was a three person God.

*(10) Go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to obey all I commanded you.
Matthew 28:19*

*(11) May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.
2 Corinthians 13:14*

*(12) There are different kinds of gifts,
but the same Spirit distributes them.
There are different kinds of service,
but the same Lord.
There are different kinds of working,
but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.
1 Corinthians 12:4 – unity in the middle of great variety.*

*(13) There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to one hope when you were called;
one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
one God and Father of all,
who is over all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4:4 – unity – seven things all believers share.*

Conclusion – Romans 6:17

You can see that there are some central teachings that the church was built around, right from the start. And, you now have a general idea what they are. There was lots of repetition in these paragraphs, saying the same things in different ways. It is good for us to grasp what teachings were at the centre from the start.

I hope you will take your handouts home, and look at them once in a while. You have in your hands there the core teachings of the New Testament churches. If there's something in them that you do not understand, ask me about it. Most of it is profound, but not complicated.

Thanks be to God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over.

This sentence pictures slaves being handed over from one master to another. "Handed over" is a literal translation of the last word: *Thank God that, although you used to be slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were **handed over**.*

We were slaves of sin, but then we heard a new kind of teaching, a new pattern of teaching. When we heard it, we obeyed it from the heart. So sin no longer ruled us and owned us. No, we've been handed over to this teaching, and now that's what we obey.

This new pattern of teaching is actually the message God has for us, and we now belong to God. Still, though, God ties himself to particular teachings, the kind that we have read over today. In Romans 6:17, becoming a believer means obeying this kind of teaching from the heart, and this teaching from God frees us from being slaves to sin. Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYER: God, thank you for the teaching summaries that we have read today. Thank you that these teachings have completely changed our lives. They have rescued us from the authority of sin and have brought us into the kingdom of the Son you love. Thank you for showing us how to love you with our minds. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.