

WHAT DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE?

Anyone who believes in something or who has an opinion about something can usually state in a few words what it is that they believe in. This is sometimes called a "statement of faith" or a "declaration of belief". In religious terms it is often called a "creed", that is, a brief summary of the main doctrines of a belief system. In Christianity, it is not the "something" that is believed in but the "someone", and that someone is Jesus Christ. The true Christian faith centres around the Person of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of Mankind, and the belief system of Christianity flows from this simple fact. What Christians basically believe then has been expressed in certain historical creeds that are rooted in the Bible as God's Word. The earliest (and shortest) of these creeds is found in the Bible itself in I Corinthians 15:3-8 where Paul writes:

"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 Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

From the above Scripture we see the following central and important truths:

- This statement was an accepted creed of the early church because Paul says that it was something of first importance that he received and then passed on to others.
- Jesus died for our sins. He is therefore our Saviour.
- He died physically and was buried. This fact shows His humanity.
- He rose from the dead after three days. This fact shows His divinity.
- As evidence of His resurrection He appeared to many people who could act as living witnesses including Paul himself. This shows that the Resurrection was an historical fact.
- The Scriptures (in this instance, the Old Testament) foretold these things. This shows that the Scriptures are inspired by God and are not just the writings of men.

The central truths that Jesus was both God and man and that therefore He could forgive sin through the giving of His sinless life in substitutionary atonement for mankind and guarantee His salvation by rising from the dead and appearing to witnesses comes out very clearly in these verses. This is basically the "Gospel", the "good news" that Jesus Christ was a real person who is alive forevermore and is able to save those who put their trust in Him.

This was, and still is, the message of the church to the world - that Jesus Christ is God come into the world as a man to be its Lord and Saviour. It was not long, however, before

this truth was challenged and corrupted by those who sought to preach "another gospel" as Galatians 1: 6-9 says,

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

From the above Scripture it is clear that there were false views that were held about Christ and the message of His salvation that were trying to infiltrate the church from earliest times. We will be looking at some of these false views later, but for now we need to realise that they did exist and that they were leading some believers astray and away from the truth. How was the church to safeguard its members against these false teachings? It soon became clear that what was needed was a strong clear statement of what the Bible really taught that could act as a guide or reference point for believers. Thus was born one of the earliest Christian creeds, the "Apostles' Creed" (it was not formulated by the apostles but was developed over the centuries from an early baptismal confession. The modern form of the creed dates from the eighth century). The Apostles' Creed outlined what Christians believed based on what the Bible clearly taught. It reads as follows:

***I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary;
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell:
The third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.***

The Biblical basis of the Apostle's Creed can be ascertained from the following Scriptures:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,

Jhn.4: 23 & 24, *"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."*

maker of heaven and earth.

Gen.1: 1, *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."*

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son,

Matt.3: 16-17, *"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'"*

Jhn.3: 16, *"For 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."*

our Lord;

Acts 2: 36, *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

Rom.10: 9, *"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

Lk.1: 34-35, *"How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin?"*

Born of the Virgin Mary;

Matt.1: 18, *"This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."*

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

Mk.15: 15, *"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."*

was crucified,

Mk.15: 25, *"It was the third hour when they crucified him."*

died,

Jhn.19: 33-34, *"But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water."*

and was buried;

Lk.23: 52-53, *"Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid."*

He descended into hell:

Acts 2: 31, *"He, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that his soul was not left in Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." (NKJV).*

Eph.4: 8-10, *"This is why it says, 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.' What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions (or, the depths of the earth). He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe."*

I Pet.3: 18-19, *"For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built."*

The third day He rose again from the dead;

Lk.24: 1-7, *"On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you while he was still with you in Galilee: The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'*

He ascended into heaven,

Lk.24: 51, *"While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven."*

And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father almighty;

Col.3: 1, *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."*

From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

II Tim.4: 1, *"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 give you this charge..."*

Rev.20: 12, *"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."*

I believe in the Holy Ghost;

Jhn.14: 26, *"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."*

the holy catholic church;

(The word *catholic* means "universal" which implies that the one church of Jesus Christ is found everywhere in the world amongst all peoples and denominations. The creed here is not referring to the denomination of the Roman Catholic Church).

Eph.5: 27, *"And to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."*

The communion of saints;

I Cor.11: 26, *"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*

Heb.10: 25, *"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

The forgiveness of sins;

I Jhn.1: 9, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

The resurrection of the body;

I Cor.15: 51-52, *"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."*

Rev.20: 6, *"Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years."*

And the life everlasting, Amen.

Rev.21: 4, *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Other creeds were also developed which dealt in more detail with certain aspects of Biblical teaching such as the deity and humanity of Christ. Such creeds arose because of ongoing heretical teaching that was constantly attempting to corrupt the church. The most well-known of these is the Nicene Creed (4th century) and the Athanasian Creed (5th century). The Nicene Creed reads as follows:

I 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 the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost 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 sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick (living) and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets.

And I believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Athanasian Creed, which is rather lengthy, will be dealt with in a later section of this course.

In more modern times many other statements of faith have emerged, but they all basically reflect the teachings of these early creeds. The creeds, then, express the basic, general and historical beliefs of Bible-believing Christians of all denominations and churches.

However, it requires something more than simply an acknowledgement of these statements of faith in order to be a true Christian believer. It requires a personal belief in the risen, living Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The Bible, in Acts 16:31 says, *"...Believe in*

the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..." Rom.10:9-10 says, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." To be a true Christian then, one cannot just believe in the creeds - one has to believe in Jesus Christ as a living, life-changing Person. But what does this mean? It simply means that one has to enter into a relationship with Jesus. This relationship begins by verbally confessing one's belief in Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Saviour. To acknowledge Jesus as one's Lord means to surrender one's life to Him as His subject or servant. To acknowledge Jesus as one's Saviour means to admit that one is a sinner in need of salvation and to recognize Jesus as the only Saviour from sin. The Bible teaches that the moment such confession is made one is "born-again" (John 3) and is saved from damnation. Rom.8: 1-2 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." In order to truly understand the creeds one must be "born-again".

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
(PAPER 001)

WHAT DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE?

Questions:

1. Why is it important to have a creed?
2. How does a person become a Christian?
3. If someone who is not a Christian asked you why you are a Christian, what would you say?
4. If someone says that they are a Christian but does not believe in any of the basic statements found in the main historical Christian creeds, what would this imply?