

## ***We Believe in God the Father***

By Dr. Dave Neale, Ph.D.

Let's review briefly where we are in our *We Believe Series* so far. The series is based on the idea that when we say the Creed we should know what we are saying; and that when we say it we should mean. We must come to believe it.

Last week we examined briefly the three bases of belief that modern authors on the psychology of belief discuss: **Authenticity** ('it feels right to me'), **self-fulfilment** ('it feels good to me') and **tradition** (we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before'). This is an extremely short-hand way of referring to a complicated topic.

And we said that our sense of **identity** is one of the key issues in determining belief, and that establishing our identity is of primary importance to how we find meaning in life.

We also said... The Creed is a summation of the key ideas of the 1600 pages of the Bible - in 229 words. The Creed was written in 325 CE by a council convened in Nicaea by the newly converted Roman Emperor Constantine. He wanted to get them to stop fighting quite so much about doctrine, especially Arianism. Tune in next week for a word about some of the language about Jesus' identity that goes back to the Council of Nicaea.

Further in review, we have spoken of God as the source of our identity, and thus basis of our meaning in life.

By the way, when the Creed calls the church the "holy catholic and apostolic church," the word catholic, small c, means the universal church, not the Roman Catholic Church.

### **The First Sentence of the Creed**

Let's take the first line of the Creed and see what sort of central ideas reside here for us to build our belief system upon.

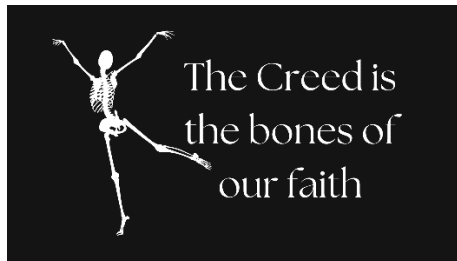
Let's say the first line of the Creed together: ***We Believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.***

I have friendly interlocuter (someone who takes part in a dialogue and questions things). She sits on my shoulder at all times checking my thoughts and quite often raising uncomfortable questions for me. Let me introduce you, I call her Dear Prudence. 'Won't you come out to play...' as the Beatles song says.

My Dear Prudence said to me the other day... 'Dr. Neale [I insist on her calling me Dr.], isn't there something distasteful about reducing the central tenets of the faith to an espresso shot of theology? And when we say it over and over, from memory, doesn't it smack of routine and loss of heart-felt belief? Doesn't this kind of repetition reduce us somehow?'

But let me liken this practice to the analogy of the body. The body is 60% water. There is water in every part of the body. The brain and heart are 73% water. The lungs 83%. And where would our bodies be without the bones that lend the whole its structure. We'd be a blob on the floor without the bones.

Every body needs bones. And your faith needs a structure. It needs "bones." And the Creed provides the central bone structure upon which the whole of the body can be reliably built. It is these bones, the central ideas of the Creed, are the ones that our faith needs to retain its proper shape.



For example, we Christians may discuss paleontology, the forms of life existing in former geologic periods. And we may ponder the history of the development of the human race. We might debate evolution and intelligent design. We may debate about how the law ought to operate or about how church canon law ought to respond to the challenges of diversity in our time. But the bones of that conversation are here in our theology.

In a sense, all the rest is peripheral to the bone structure of our faith.

### **We believe in one God...**

The first idea of the Creed, the most important theological statement for Christian theology, echoes the Shema, the most important prayer in Judaism. God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). It has been said daily by pious Jews all over the world for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

***Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*** You might remember that, when asked by his contemporaries, ***Which commandment is the first of all?*** Jesus quoted this passage and a second one from Leviticus (19:18), ***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***

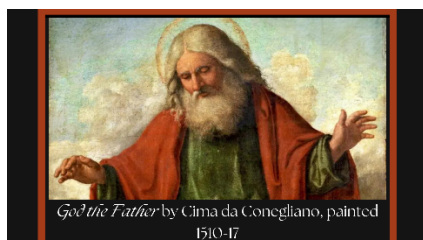
So the Christian Creed begins with an idea that is foundational to all that follows.<sup>2</sup>

If you feel the “perpetual unease” of our time, as I spoke of last week, I invite you to consider the Oneness of God.

By saying “We believe in one God,” we are affirming that God is all in all. Nothing exists outside of sublime Oneness of His nature. Allow that to settle your heart and mind, in the quietude of your morning, in this time, that God is One. When nothing seems to be settled or sure we walk as children of the One. ***We believe in One God...***

### **...the Father Almighty**

There are two ideas here. One is that we refer to God by the term “Father.” The other is that He is “Almighty.”



***We believe in God the Father*** For some the maleness of this declaration about God as Father might be, well... uncomfortable. Does God indeed possess gender?

No... the One does not. Gender proceeds from God. He is the creator of gender. But he himself (there I go... the language is normalized by the conventions of several millennia of patriarchal custom) is beyond gender of course. He is the source of all gender, but God is not constrained by gender.

So please be aware, that when I use the pronoun “He” for God I do not mean to say he is male.

And the other idea is the notion that God is “Almighty.” El Shaddai is the name of God in the OT usually translated as the Almighty. This is the affirmation of God’s “omnipotence,” which means he is all powerful. By this we saying that “all other powers depend on God for whatever power they possess, and no power can ultimately thwart him.”<sup>3</sup>

We have problems with evil and suffering to be sure, but the important word for us “ultimately.” Evil and suffering may have their day, but we believe that God is ultimately and finally sovereign. And at least in part, evil and suffering come as a necessary by-product of God’s creation of an ordered environment and the gift of human freedom.

### ***Maker of heaven and earth...***

The entire Bible teaches that God is active in the physical world – this is a basic tenet of theism. Compare to deism, which allows that there is a divinity but this divinity does not act in the physical world.

From the first verse of the Bible we see God as one who creates. From the beginning God was present in the form of the Spirit who hovered over creation (Gen 1:1).<sup>4</sup> See footnote iv for a striking passage in Isaiah, where this idea reaches its zenith.

Dear Prudence said to me this week, ‘But, Dr. Neale, isn’t being true to oneself, living authentically, genuinely, really the most important thing? And if we fail to find fulfilment in life, self-fulfilment, then where is the value in living?’

And I would say, ‘There is some truth in what you say. We ought to live in authenticity and enjoy self-fulfilment in life. I’m not an ascetic, someone who practices extreme self-denial.

But the whole prospect of living changes when we understand that we are creatures, created by God. And therein lies the basis of our existence and the true source of all authenticity and fulfilment. It is not to be found in the ‘Me,’ it is to be found in the ‘Other.’ For us, the ‘other’ is the God of Scripture.

In saying ***We believe God is the Maker of heaven and earth*** we say one of the very most significant things we can say about our understanding of our own *identity*. We are not just an ego and an id, although I suppose we are that too; we are not an accident of mechanistic evolution; we don’t exist simply unto ourselves. We are children of the Maker.

If you believe that God is the ***Maker of heaven and earth*** you have said the most beautiful thing about your understanding of self. God created us in the image of himself. From the oldest among us, ravaged by the years, to the youngest, to our dear Heston. We are all children of the Maker.

**God as Maker** radically alters the way you see the universe and the earth. Think about how this theology compels us to protect the God-given environment on which we all depend for life.

**God as Maker** radically alters our perspective on human life, shifting us from a life of self-centeredness and despair to a life suffused with hope and the promise of life to come.

And, I think above all, this phrase that ***God is the Maker of heaven and earth*** radically alters the way we relate to our fellow human beings. The Creed doesn't talk about humanity explicitly, although the Bible does on every page (I wish I had been at Nicaea to have argued for a line about humanity created in God's image, and maybe a line about climate change).

That God made heaven and earth is the only point in the Creed that touches on *humanity*, and you have to be attuned to the subtlety of the statement to get the point.

Practically, the most powerful idea in our role as witnesses to the eternal truth of God the Father and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is how we, by our lives, express the truth that ***all*** human beings are created by God, and thus equal in His sight. Irrespective of religion, gender identity, race, ethnicity, atheist or believer. And that, as witnesses of this eternal truth, we are called to treat each and every one with the same love in which we know God created them; and in the same love that we have the joy of walking day-by-day.

### ***... of all that is, seen and unseen***

One of the more incisive criticisms of those bases of identity that are focused on the self (authenticity and self-fulfilment) is their shallow nature as a source of identity. If your identity lives and dies with the human body, it is indeed just a biological happenstance. Taylor calls it the principal of immanence. He means to say that the here and now is all that there is, all that we have. The "seen," as the Creed puts it, is all there is. In this sense, the Creed is supremely relevant for today's society.

80% of Canadians believe in something like "God."

By saying that we believe God is the Maker of all that is ***seen and unseen*** we declare our belief that life is not constrained by the present moment. That time doesn't define us, that we have not just the presence of the divine in this moment but the hope of the world to come. As the Creed says ***...his kingdom will have no end.***

This is the thing... and this thought isn't original with me, but I really like this and I think it is true. What we have to offer those who are disaffected with secularism is transcendence.<sup>5</sup>

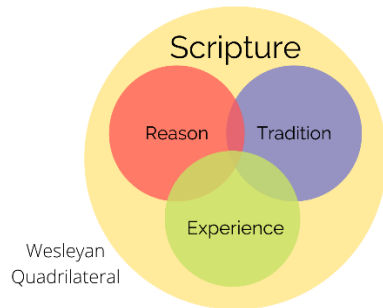
It's not enthusiasm the world needs from us, it is the sense of the **sacred**. And this is why the popularity of liturgy is growing among the young. Because it conveys a sense of the holy, and that is what is missing in the modern perspective.

### **Applying the Creed to Life**

Now you may be a person who doesn't struggle with belief. You may well have been raised with believing in Christ as a way of life, and discussions of how belief operates aren't really relevant for you. You just believe, and always will. But the fact that we often fail in passing on our beliefs to our younger generation makes the question important for us all.

One of the things I want to suggest in this series is that belief can be demystified. You can actually work on your life of faith as a focused effort to grow. It isn't magic, it is a slow careful pathway of being what we call a 'disciple.' A Learner.

Our Wesleyan tradition (there is the word again!) holds that there are four practical aspects of believing.



- **Scripture** – As understood in its long narrative arc. Action: attend to the reading of Scripture as a practice and attend to the preaching of the Scripture in church. Maybe download the sermon notes and look through the passages we discuss week by week. Over time you will become better at reading and interpreting the Bible on your own.
- **Tradition** – that which is handed on from generation to generation, our long belief practice of the faith. Action: memorize the Creed and allow it to marinate in your heart and mind.
- **Reason** – We do, in fact, have a practical expectation that we can explore both our rational convictions and our doubts within the context of our spiritual journey. Action: make friends with your internal interlocutor. Allow your mind to question and change as you think your way to what you truly believe and what you do not. If you don't believe something, say it, and try to understand how an idea can be meaningful. Actively say, *this* is core to my belief system, and *that* is peripheral to the core. **Core** is the idea that Jesus' kingdom will never end, and peripheral to that is **how** it will all transpire.
- **Experience** – this is the acknowledgment that we do experience God and that it is a legitimate aspect of our belief system. I don't know about you, but religious conviction that is not felt is just a wooden, uninspiring life.

***We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.***

And if you ever get discouraged, remember this: We probably can't talk the world's population into accepting the revelation of Christ, but perhaps we can love them into a revelation of God. We have no other or better means of witness than to love others as we love ourselves.

<sup>1</sup> We are, of course, about to go on to say more about **how** God has made himself known in history, by speaking about the Son, the Spirit and the church. This differentiates our understanding of one God by asserting the doctrine of the trinity. We are immediately plunged into the mystery of Christian theology, that God is one, and yet is expressed in two additional persons. Monotheism, the belief that there is only one God (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) really began to mature into its fullest, sublime expression in Isaiah (e.g. 45:14-25 for 9 monotheistic assertions about God). We are the heirs of centuries of tradition in our confession that God is One. And may I say that, while we proclaim the oneness of God, the unity of God. We more than proclaim it. We contemplate (yes, that is the right word) the Oneness of God

<sup>2</sup> There were, practically speaking, two religions in Israel. The official version, represented by the writings of Deuteronomy and Isaiah et al, there monotheism is expressed in its pure form. But in popular religion of Israel, the people continued in their worship of many gods. For examples see Hosea 3:1, 4:11-14, 9:1, 7:16, 8:45 and many others, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 1, 1102ff). The most notable chapter on monotheism in Isaiah is chapter 45, where one author asserts there are at least a dozen affirmations of this great doctrine.

No one among us ought to think that saying God is One is easy to say. The compilation of the Hebrew Bible, took 800 years to accomplish. Hebrew people spent centuries formulating their understanding of this idea that there is only one true God. Their history is the story of wandering away from the idea that God is one, returning again and again to the polytheism of their time. When they left Egypt they were still polytheists, as the first commandment attests... **You shall have no other gods before me...** (Ex 20:1). The great theme of Isaiah is the ultimate establishment of this great idea, and all the prophets focussed their call to Israel on this one great idea – come back to the one true God

<sup>3</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, p. 413.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the rare references to the creation story in the Bible (another would be some sections of Job), the prophet Isaiah reaffirms God as creator, **and** connects it to the oneness of God. For thus says the LORD,  
who created the heavens  
    (he is God!),  
who formed the earth and made it  
    (he established it;  
he did not create it a chaos,  
    he formed it to be inhabited!):  
I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Isa 45:18).

<sup>5</sup> *Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson*, pp. 16-17.