

We Believe Series: God the Son Part II

By Dr. Dave Neale

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Here is the heart of the earliest community's confession of Jesus, found in the barest possible narrative about his birth, suffering, death, resurrection, exaltation, and return as the judge of the living and the dead.

We can sleepwalk our way through the Creed. We can say what we "believe" without ever really engaging the whole of our being in the process (Scripture, tradition, experience, reason). Or, we can enter the construct of world it portrays. We can take it to heart, because the Creed is the Bible, the story of the Bible is the Creed.

You can make it the construct of your mind. AS Johnson says, "We can make it a public statement of shared conviction."¹



The largest aspen grove in the world, in Utah, is name Pando: Latin for "I spread out." It sprouted 80,000 years ago from a seed the size of a pepper grain and now supports almost 50,000 trunks, making it the heaviest living thing in the world – and one of the oldest.² It is a single root system. This is a pretty good metaphor for the power of a shared system of thought.



This morning I had Acts 10:34-43 read because it would be among the earlier summaries of what the First Followers believed about the life death and resurrection of Jesus in the several decades following the event.

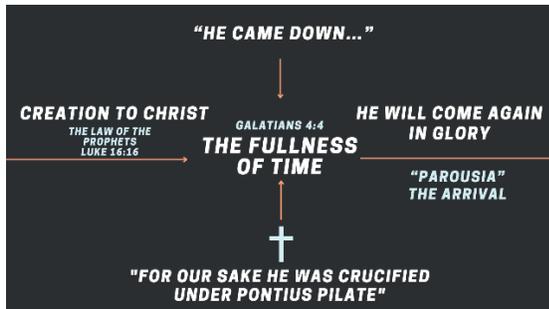
An even earlier, and famous summary, is that of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Cor 15:3-4).

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The Christian view of history is beautifully expressed in these scriptural summaries.

This is how biblical theology sees history. There are three stages.³



1. From Creation to Christ.

“We Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all that is, seen and unseen” (the first line of the Creed).

2. The presence of Christ among us, the subject of our enquiry last week and this week, who Christ was ontologically and what he has done.

Jesus himself expressed this view of history: **“The Law and the Prophets were until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is being proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force”** (Luke 16:16).

But perhaps the most beautiful expression of this idea is that of Paul in Gal 4:4:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children (Galatian 4:4).

3. And the period of the church, with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and finally the Parousia (the word of the day!). It means “the arrival.”

In Matthew 24:3 as Jesus speaks of the end of time, the disciples ask him, **...what will be the sign of your coming** (παρουσία, *Parousia*)?

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory (Matt 24:30).

Did you know that the phrase “second coming” doesn’t occur in the Bible? It is first found in Justin’s *Apology* (c. A.D. 150).⁴

...he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

This is what we call the end of history in the Christian view of the world. This is the core of the biblical teaching on the end of history; any other readings of how are to be considered as on the periphery of biblical theology, never the centre. That he will come again in glory and judgment is all we know really. It's all we need to know.

Listen to how Paul put it: ***When Christ who is your life is revealed, the you also will be revealed with him in glory*** (Colossians 3:4).

The real meat of the Creed is to be found here: **For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...**

...he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures...

The Great Fork in the Road

“...he suffered death and was buried.”

On the third day he rose again.”

Here we confront the mystery of the cross. May I suggest you see my footnote in the manuscript for a bit more on the difficulty of the theology of the cross.⁵

But we do know that John said of Jesus, ***Behold, the lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world*** (Jonh 1:29). And the declaration in Romans 5:8, ***But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.***

This is the fork in the road; it is the world that exists between the period and the capital letter. It is the difference between the historicity of the execution and the transcendent assertion of the resurrection. It is where you leave or you stay and say ‘Let me stay and explore and seek belief in humility.’

How does “belief” work at this point in the Creed. The Creed doesn’t say. It is simply the assertion of the resurrection.

The Bible doesn’t really offer a definition of belief that modernity can accept.

Jesus seemed to conceive of belief mainly as the practice of the faith. He said love God with all your heart and your mind and your strength, and your neighbor as your self. Jesus gave us the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus gave us 30 parables and about 300 other sayings to guide our hearts and our mind.

Creed: “For us and for our salvation....” “For our sake he was crucified...”

How do you get from the period to the capital letter? Would that it were a mechanistic, tick-the-boxes process! Say this, think this, “believe” this and you are saved. Come to the altar. We don’t need slogans or snappy phrases.

But it isn't mechanistic. And journey of belief is, in its nature, a mystical journey. So here we owe it to ourselves to speak with care, and honesty and discernment. We wish to attend to this space between the period and the capital letter in humility. Because in this space we encounter the mystery of salvation.

This is a very holy, delicate, mysterious space. In Wesleyan theology we speak of the prevenient grace of God bridging the gap between the period and the capital. The point of that doctrine is to say this is God wooing us to salvation.⁶ The ideas aren't simple ones.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand... (Rom 5:1)

We have ***faith*** and we have ***grace in which we stand***.

There is faith (πιστις, *pistis*). ***Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*** (Heb 11:1); and grace (χαρις, *charis*). ***For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast*** (Ephesians 2:8).

...holy, delicate, mysterious space

What is the believing of which we speak? I think I can tell you what it isn't.

It isn't the "leap of faith" of Kierkegaard. We have many reasons to believe. It isn't about bridging the gap between uncertainty and certainty.

It *is* about embracing the journey of faith and the grace which makes it available to us. You have to want this. You have to want God.

Jesus said to Nicodemus ***...you must be born from above***.

If you want to know what to do... come to God in humility and take a step on the path. I say that whether you have been on the path for 60 years or if you are just beginning today. No prideful person can know this experience, only those who have humbled themselves before God.

Somewhere in my reading I came across this apt phrase about how the gospel of Christ has suffered death by a thousand cuts in modernity. First it was the virgin birth that was called in to doubt. Then the miracles of Jesus (they have other explanations) and, of course, the resurrection.

But if you don't choose this path of meaning... what is the alternative? Self? The hopelessness of a life with no transcendence. No Parousia to make it all right? "Well," you say, "that's just the way the world is." I do not envy you your world view and I invite you to consider a higher life.

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 6.

² Earthdate.org, *Pando*.

³ The most well-known expression of this view is Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, see p. 151ff.

⁴ *Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, p. 428.

⁵ The various theologies of the cross are drawn from a relatively small number of passages in the Bible, and most of those from the Pauline corpus. The Gospel of Mark, for example, says little about the *reason* Jesus was crucified – save one oblique reference in Mark 10:45. The significance of the cross is drawn out by Paul in a variety of passages, but they do not, on the whole, set out a very clear case of the evangelical doctrine which views Christ's death on the cross as a substitution for our own punishment. This is a view called the penal view of the atonement. That is, Christ suffered death on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for our sins. Hebrews 9 would come the closest to articulating something like a penal substitution view of the reason for Christ's suffering. Many Christian denominations no longer see the cross in this light.

Here are the texts in the NT that describe the *meaning* of the cross (omitting passages that simply report the crucifixion in the passion narratives). 1 Cor 1:17, 18; Gal 5:11, 6:12, 14; *Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8, 3:18; *Col 1:20, 2:14; Heb 12:2. As you can see there are not many such passages and that they are not very specific as to the "why" and "how" of the way the cross works in our theology. I put an asterisk beside two of the more explicit theological statements. The task of theology is to read the texts and formulate theology based on the Bible. We call this "biblical theology." This task often engenders debate among Christians.

David Yeago, in his chapter in *Nicene Christianity*, by Christopher Steitz, says this about the reasons proposed other than substitutionary atonement. "Mainline Christians today live uneasily amidst the rubble of the old doctrine of penal substitution, according to which Jesus was the divinely provided substitute who endure in our place the infinite punishment that God's justice must impose on our sin" (p. 88).

⁶ Reform theology bridges the space between the period and the capital with election. Salvation is given according, not to human choice, but God's sovereign action.