

We Believe Series: Part I We Need the Creed

By Dr. Dave Neale, Ph.D.

Introductory Comments to the Series

In this series I want to explore, in the course of these six weeks, what and why we believe, and to refresh our knowledge and commitment to the central ideas of our faith. I am doing this because for the past year or so Christine and I have been reflecting on the Nicene Creed in our morning coffee time. We've been memorizing it and saying it out loud. And so its substance has had a rather profound effect on us spiritually.

But I've also been drawn to the Creed because of conversations in the literature and the media about the future of Christianity, and whether we turn to our ancient roots, or whether perhaps Christianity will again morph, as it did in the Reformation, in a new direction altogether. Is a return to the Creed the future of Christianity, or does it lie elsewhere?¹ See my footnotes on the manuscript on line for additional thoughts throughout on this message.

Also, I just feel like it is time, as our seasons of life turn and turn here at the church, to return to the foundations of our belief; to identify the central ideas that we need to stand on; and to help us understand afresh what is central and what is peripheral to our faith.

The Sociology of our Position as a Church

In 2000 Reginald Bibby (University of Lethbridge) said that religion was in straight decline, no hope. He said that "Even with the Toronto Maple Leafs there is hope for a better year, but for religion it's over."

In 2015 he revisited the question and found he was wrong. Not about religion among white Canadians. It is in decline with the greatest drop off among the young. What he missed was the influx of immigrants, who are highly religious, the two biggest groups being Muslim and Catholic.

Still, 26% of Canadians reject religion, 30% embrace it and 44% are "somewhere in between." While almost 80% of Canadians express some belief in "God" or the transcendent, the traditional expressions of this are primarily among the older generations.

By the way, among the young (18-34) adherence to traditional religion is much higher among immigrant populations. 50% among immigrant populations compared to only half that among traditional (white) Canadians. The number is 22%. The profile of our kind of congregation is that we aren't being successful at passing on our faith to our children.

And, in terms of the sociology of position as a church, what about the reality that Christianity is no longer the default setting in a multi-culture society where diversity and pluralism are written, not just into the cultural code, but into the legal code?² How ought Christians believe and behave *as a religious minority*?

Some Questions to Get Us Primed on Our Quest

I begin with a series of questions that I hope we might, over the next number of weeks, explore together in relation to the Nicene Creed, the theological essence of historical Christianity.

What does it mean to "believe"? Does it matter what we believe? How do we find our way to meaning in life? Is there a true standard by which we can say what is right and wrong, what is true and false, in a time where there is so much division and confusion in public life?

Or, is what I believe really just up to me?

We can see, can we not, the importance of revisiting our foundations of belief?

What about here, in our actual lives, where we are trying to find meaning and live well in the midst of our challenges of life, and in today's frayed sense of what is the public good, the common good.

What is the roadmap to belief?

These are the kinds of questions that the consideration of the Creed raises for us. We need a fresh take on our basic beliefs and we need tools to believe.

And these are the kinds of questions that, I will be suggesting in this series, are answered by a return to our tap root of the faith, which is represented by the 229 words of the Nicene Creed.

This is all fresh reflection on my part. I don't have all the answers to this complex set of questions necessarily. I haven't written the next five sermons yet. I'm exploring this with you in quite a public way. But the title of my sermon today is ***We Need the Creed***, so you know where I stand.

See my manuscript on line week by week to see more material and my references to the literature.

What are the Bases of Belief?

There is the law of course, the moral code that is embedded and embodied in our legal system. The law has standards about how we judge right from wrong. These prescriptions against unlawful behaviour are the basics of a moral code based on the ten commandments.

But what about in religion? Is there a true standard here?

I recently had a conversation with two twentysomethings. I asked, what do you guys believe? The answer, "we don't know." An admittedly small sample, but I think this is in accord with the state of our times.

It points to the reality that, as we search for meaning in this secular age, we find an "explosion of different options," made fragile "competing options" for life, and, as Jordan Peterson says, "we find ourselves in perpetual unease."³

Charles Taylor is professor emeritus at McGill University and the leading Canadian intellectual on the psychology of belief. He has written two tomes on the subject, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. I preferred to read *The Malaise of Modernity*. This is an espresso version, more accessible to mere mortals such as myself, where he sets out the challenge of belief in our age.

The central issue is the matter of ***identity***. One author has said that the increase in neuroses in our society today is caused by the difficulty people have in finding an identity that brings meaning in life.⁴ In an earlier day meaning was provided by the acceptance of Christianity at the centre of public life, or a confidence in government, for example. These sources of "identity" have been eroded.

While I'm by no means an expert on this topic, I think I see a fair bit of alignment between Taylor and with what I understand C. S. Lewis to be saying, as well as the prominent Christian pastor and thinker Timothy Keller, and even the controversial, but always interesting (again Canadian), public intellectual Jordan Peterson.⁵

They all decry the loss of a shared public sense of morality – in short, a shared roadmap to belief.

So in the world we inhabit now, we form identity, Taylor says, on three very different bases.

- **Authenticity.** “The ethic of authenticity,” says Taylor, “is something relatively new and particular to modern culture.”⁶ The words that would tend to describe the basis of the culture of authenticity would be *subjectivism*, the *soft relativism* of truth based on my own perspective, and the view that “Everybody has his or her own ‘values,’ and about these it is impossible to argue.”⁷ And importantly, this extends not just to one’s views about reason, but it also applies to morals. That is, we can’t argue about morals, because everybody has their own set that makes them feel “authentic.”⁸ The ethic of authenticity is very prominent in our time, especially among the younger generations. On the positive side it is based on mutual respect, that everyone has a right to their own opinion and their own sense of what is important. Negatively, it leaves its adherents without a sure anchor, or a solid place upon which belief can rest.
- **Self-fulfilment.** Self-fulfilment is a good thing. I’m all for it, I’m sure I seek it as ardently as anyone. But if self-serving individualism becomes the basis of meaning in life, ‘What makes me feel fulfilled and happy is my ultimate concern,’ a person loses sight of “concerns that transcend them.” The only concern is being true to oneself.⁹ If you accept no moral demands it is impossible to argue with you about what is right and wrong. Words that can be associated with it are “egoism,” “self-indulgence,” “narcissism.” Just because something makes you happy doesn’t qualify it as moral principle. Moral principles have immutable, universal value. Only we classic traditionalists have it – God.

Now here is the thing. I don’t think authenticity is bad. I don’t think self-fulfilment is a bad thing.¹⁰ You can bridle at being told there are rules of tradition we need to follow. You can say, ‘No one can tell me what to do.’ But eventually you will be left only with what you ‘want’ and life will become as shallow as your desires.

I’d like to visit Dubai as a curiosity. Because in Dubai you everything that money could buy, built or dream up. It is a city of all that can be desired. In Dubai they have ATM’s that dispense gold.



If this is your life, I hope you are strong, because it difficult to shoulder your way through the tides of life. ‘What makes me feel good’ and ‘what makes me feel authentic’ are a low bar for one’s values in life. Self-absorption will always dissolve into a moral vacuum. If there is no true bottom to stand on, we find we have lost our way.

- **Traditional values.** Tradition means that which is handed on from generation to generation. Now that can mean a lot of things, ranging from what you typically do at Christmas, to a nostalgia for a simpler Leave it to Beaver world or other much deeper traditions. I am using the term here to describe the “tap root” of our traditional adherence to the Creed.¹¹ Modernity, of course, does not value tradition.

- This is where I stand, and your presence here today suggests that you stand here too. I believe in the traditional values of love, care for our fellow human beings, in the family, in public order and respect for God. I stand here because I believe these values to have their basis in the God of Scripture. And the Creed is the expression of the central ideas of Scripture, as we shall see.
- Can you see that the Creed, the ancient proclamation of our forefathers and sisters in the faith, is the foundational statement of the most traditional of all bases.

Without the deeper transcendent reality of God, without the irrevocable basis of God's loving character, life becomes too hard to bear.

As we proceed you'll hear more about this and I'll be making reference to these different bases of identity. And I hope I will be able to give us some tools that will help us navigate our way.

What is the Creed and Why is it Important?

I have a book that was given to me called *Pioneer Churches of Vancouver Island*. It is a lovely little volume that is a guide to 46 historic churches built on the Island in the decades following the gold rush. I am always amazed at the strength of belief that has always caused people to erect churches, grand and humble, as an expression of the truth of the Creed.

What is a creed and what is the Nicene Creed? It is basically the compression of 1600 pages of biblical narrative into 229 words. It is the ultimate espresso version of Christian theology.¹²

It was created by the Council of Nicaea in about 325 CE, at the behest of Constantine, who basically wanted the various branches of the church to stop arguing about Arianism primarily. Nevertheless, the Creed is an agreed upon statement of the essence of the biblical narrative.

Let me put it another way, from Genesis to Revelation, the Creed captures the essential points of Christian theology and its world view.¹³ Its purpose and essence is theological. It isn't about the innumerable peripheral issues of theology and church practice. It is our core belief.

And an important benefit is knowing the creed we put the peripheral in its place. We can and will debate the peripheral, but we are bound together by the core.

Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, says that the Creed is actually the most radical counter-cultural stance we could take today. Something to offend everyone! Further, that what we offer to a despairing world is the hope of transcendence.¹⁴

But my contention in this series, is that the Creed must be central to our future, if we are to continue to call ourselves adherents to the biblical faith. We. Need. The. Creed.

What I am saying is that, for us, the Creed is the solid foundation upon which we stand. It is our anchor in the storms of modern disenchantment and our roadmap to transcendence.¹⁵

While we don't understand everything about the Bible. We are conflicted about the value of some religious traditions. And yes, we have intellectual convictions as well as doubt when it comes to the faith journey.

But in reciting the Creed we are just agreeing to enter in on an honest journey of belief that encompasses our whole being. Sometimes we think it is an impossible journey. We don't have to be

convinced beyond a shadow of doubt to enter into belief. We just have to have open hearts and minds to God.

You may recall Jesus himself said, ***Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you*** (Matt 7:7).

Lord's Prayer sung before Communion

¹ As in the writings of Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith*, 2010. Of course, not all of Christendom believes that the *future* of Christianity should be shaped by a return to, and affirmation of this ancient creed. Modern Christendom has delivered a death by a thousand cuts to creedal belief. The authority of Scripture, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the reliability of the witness of the church.

² This is called the "politics of equal recognition." The movement from Mr. Mrs. to Ms. to non-binary pronouns is a hot topic in culture. *The Malaise of Modernity*, p. 39.

³ *Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson*, p. 16, ed. Ron Dart.

⁴ Ibid, p. 9

⁵ By Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age*, 2007 and *Sources of Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, 1989; *The Malaise of Modernity*, 1991. By C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1952. By Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, 2008.

⁶ *The Malaise of Modernity*, p. 25.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 12 and 17.

⁸ This idea was first raised for us by Harold Boom's 1987 hallmark book, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

⁹ *The Malaise of Modernity*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Neither does Charles Taylor in *The Malaise of Modernity*. But the point is that these bases cannot serve as moral principles.

¹¹ Modernity or post-modernity (or which ever modernity is in vogue now) does not value "tradition." If Elon Musk was a traditionalist we would never have had the Tesla. However, from the standpoint of faith and morality, we hold tradition to be of essential value. I'm in trepidation about handing the reins of Twitter over to Musk.

¹² *The Apostles' Creed* is more common in Nazarene polity and practice. The congregation recites the Apostles' creed only at the sacrament of baptism in the *Nazarene Manual* (p. 264). But it is rarely used in congregational gatherings. By comparison to the Nicene Creed at 229 words, the Apostles' Creed is even more abbreviated, at about half the length.

¹³ There were "canons" of how church polity should be conducted, canons which are long obsolete for us.

¹⁴ *Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁵ You may be that person for whom belief in Christianity has been a life-long habit, never wavering; a life where doubt was never to be countenanced and certainty of belief has been the highest value.

I'm preaching to the choir, I know. We are here as Christians and we speak as Christians. I'm not going to say anything Christian believers don't already know or believe. I don't expect to be converting any ardent agnostics or atheists to Christianity. There are others who have given their lives to that end.

You will no doubt recite the Creed without having the kind of grasp of Scripture that you might wish. You may actually know very little about the Bible. That is why we can rely on the Creed to help us along that journey.

You may know very little about the traditions of the church, both universal and denominational. You probably have severe judgment over the failings of our church's history, you may well know or care little for church polity per se. The Creed helps us bear in mind that this is the tap root, the essential tradition to which we hold.

You may have intellectual doubts about the Christian faith and its theology. Your experiences are as varied as the colors of the rainbow, and yet you do have and experience of the transcendent, the divine, even of the Holy Spirit moving within your soul and being. Yes, experience matters as it is understood through the lens of these essential statements about how the world is infused with God's presence and action.