

Intro: The importance of Doctrine

Today we are wading deeply into Christian doctrine. Our topic is the three historic creeds- the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed and the Athanasian Creed. But before we look at them, we need to know what they are. And what they are first of all is doctrine. And you might be thinking hmmpf, doctrine, how very dry. So let me start with a brief defence of doctrine. It is good that we reflect on systematized statements about God, Jesus, the world, the Bible, our salvation, our ethical life, and our eternity. Now I know that doctrine isn't a topic that the world likes to talk about. Doctrine sounds to the world like you're trying to impose your religious views on me, you're trying to have power over what I think. And it's irrelevant to my life, and it's all made up anyway. And so perhaps as a result we Christians sometimes avoid talking about doctrine, or letting on that we are interested in it. In truth, I wouldn't describe our church as deeply passionate about doctrine. So let me defend its importance briefly

I want you to notice that Christians aren't the only ones who teach doctrine or try to persuade others of *their* doctrine. So many people in our world do exactly that. They not only have views, but they try to win us to their views about freedom, love, human rights, self-worth, satisfaction, equality, self-identity, the purposes for which we should live, and the ends to which they think the world is heading. And those all topics of doctrine. And if they are doing it, it's quite reasonable that we Christians do it too. In fact we need to do it because others do it.

Because if we don't bring our thoughts together in systematic logical order, we will be at greater risk of being like a weathervane in our thinking. We'll be every chance of being swept along by every new fad of teaching whether it is good or bad. And believe me, new fads of teaching will keep coming. They come from within the church and without. They come in movies, ads, and magazines. They come in newspapers, the nightly news, websites, churches, friends and family. And that means if you haven't thought much about your system of doctrine you'll not be ready when the really big challenge comes your way. And you won't recognize that it is the big challenge. You'll be less useful to others and to Jesus than you should be.

That means we don't go along with that key motto of the Churches of Christ, 'no creed but the Bible'. Don't get me wrong I love the Churches of Christ. My Grandma was a fantastic Christian example to our family, from Churches of Christ, my great grandfather was one of their missionaries, my father was taught and baptized by them, my wife and parents in law come from Churches of Christ stock. I love the Churches of Christ, and owe them a great deal. But one of their flaws is this 'no creed but the Bible' motto. They don't say Creeds, they don't have a prayer book, for that reason. But I want to say, if you take that motto to its end point, it becomes, 'we don't like to organize our thoughts', it becomes, 'we don't like to make sure our thinking is consistent', it becomes 'we don't like to learn from the history of organized Christian thinking'. But no, we need to learn from others, we don't stand alone in front of our Bibles. So today we draw on centuries of Christian wisdom as we look at the doctrine of these historic Creeds.

The three Creeds

But you might ask, why Creeds, and why these three? One answer is that these are widely accepted as foundational Creeds in the Western church. These three Creeds are also called the Ecumenical Creeds for that very reason. They are accepted by the Presbyterians, the Roman Catholics, the Lutheran Churches and the Anglicans, just to name a few. Another answer is that all Anglican clergy have to give their assent to them before they are ordained. Another answer is that they are in our prayer book and liturgies. But the most important answer lies in what they teach, both positively and negatively.

You might not recognize it, but these creeds are indeed primarily speaking negatively - they are primarily saying what we disagree with. And that's because of their history of production. Over its history, Christian doctrine has grown through controversy - through disagreement and debate. Challenges have been made from various angles. And slowly but surely the church at its best has responded using the Bible as the supreme authority. The church at its best has rejected error and heresy, but embraced and adjusted to sound critique. And it has been the heresies first and the serious errors second that have produced the good Creeds and statements of faith. Do note the distinction here. By heresies, I mean doctrines which, if believed firmly, if acted on without repentance, lead a person outside of the kingdom of God, to condemnation. Serious

errors are less serious than that. They are errors that are sufficiently serious that they lead to substantial negative impact on a person and their relationships.

But my point is that these Creeds have been forged historically through the church's interaction with heresy and serious error. To understand them therefore, we need a rough grasp of the history that produced them. So here it comes:

After the death of the apostles, the main early church controversies were about the nature of the Son of God, and his relationship to his Father. The most notable heresy of the first 300 years is called Arianism. Arius insisted that the Son's divinity was less than that of the Father, and that the Son a beginning, while the Father did not. The Son was created, according to Arianism. And the most important declaration of the Nicene council of 325 AD was that Arianism is heresy.

Another important heresy of those early centuries is called Sabellianism or Patripassianism. It's the teaching that the one God appears with three different masks. So when he is wearing one mask, he is not wearing the other two. It's called Patripassianism because that term means the Father suffers, as though the Father were killed on the cross. Which is wrong. When you're praying, don't accidentally thank the Father for dying for you. He didn't, that was the Son. But this is a similar heresy to Arianism, because they are both trying and failing to give an explanation of how the Father can be God, and the Son also God, while at the same time there is only one God.

After the Nicene council of 325 AD Arianism was basically defeated, and the main issue changed. It became how we might or might not say that the divinity of Christ and the humanity of Christ cohere in the person of the Son. How can Jesus be at the same time God and human? The debates hung around whether Christ has one or two natures (divine and human nature), and one or two persons. The question was how to speak of the divine and human nature together in one Christ? Nestorianism was the heresy that denied that Christ in Mary's womb was divine as well as human. Eutychianism denied that Christ has two natures, and claims he has only one, a fusion of human and divine elements. Appollinarianism insisted that Jesus did not have a human mind, but a divine one. The most important settlement of these matters was made at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, and is reflected in the three Creeds. OK that's a potted history. It's time for a video

[Play Lutheran satire video]

Why do we care?

You might ask at this point, why are these heresies so bad? Why should I care so much about this level of detail about these details? Why would God care so much? The main answer is to consider the links between these doctrines and Christ's ability to save us all. If these heresies are embraced, what follows is that the Christ presented would be unable to save us. And so the heresies present a false Christ and a false gospel.

Think about our salvation for a moment. If Jesus were not fully God, as a perfect sacrifice he could not take the punishment for the sin of the whole world - he could only make a one person for one person trade. To illustrate, sometimes in our legal system, an innocent person can take the demerit points for a guilty person, by various means. And some of those are legal, and arguably even fair. But of course an innocent person can never take the demerit points for every guilty party in the state. That would be clearly unfair, even if the innocent person were willing. They've only got 12 demerit points to give, and rightly so. Even those cheating the system only get a 1-1 trade. But it's because Jesus is fully God that his punishment is enough for all people. Since he made and rules the system and its people, he can take the demerit points for us all.

Athanasius, a great hero of the fourth century, pointed out that if Christ weren't God by nature he wouldn't be able to form the true likeness of God in us. That's part of what Christ does for Christians - he comes into us by his Spirit, and steadily restores in us the likeness of God we were meant to have. But he couldn't do that if he were merely a creation of God. He has to be God himself to do that. If you want to be like an Australian, you've got to have real Australians in and around you. If you want to be like God, you've got to have the real God in and around you.

And so it must be, in order for our salvation to be accomplished, that the Son and the Spirit must be truly and fully God, equal with the Father. There can't have been a time when the Son was created. So the Nicene Creed declares the Son to be *eternally* begotten of the Father. The Athanasian Creed calls the Son uncreated, eternal, and of the Father begotten.

It says that 'in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another... the three Persons are coequal.' Just as John 3:16 calls Jesus 'his only begotten Son' and John 5:18 speaks of Jesus as 'equal with God'.

Different arguments were used later on, when the issue was how the divine and human nature coexisted in Christ. Gregory of Nazianzus had a famous and important argument. He said 'that which is not assumed is not healed'. If Jesus didn't have a human mind, he couldn't redeem the human mind. If he was a strange mixture, half god half human, he could only heal half of each of us. The other half of each of us would still be corrupt and under condemnation. So the Athanasian Creed has a lengthy discussion aiming to undergird this truth. It declares of the Son is 'One [Christ]; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood by God. One altogether; not by confusion of Essence; but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ.' The Nicene Creed simply calls Jesus 'truly human'. In Hebrews 2:17, the Bible puts the argument that Jesus needed to be fully human to save us. *'For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might [...] make atonement for the sins of the people.'*

Again, it's only when you grasp the character of the errors corrected that you grasp the full meaning of these Creeds. And they are defending a view of Christ such that he is able to save us. Just like the Bible does.

But you might still be thinking, this is all too abstract. Is it really useful to spend such time on such details about God? Isn't what we do vastly more important than what we believe? There's a guy called Rodney Stark who has written an interesting book arguing that Christianity is the reason that the Western world succeeded so much more than other civilizations. The Book is called 'The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success'. One of his arguments is that it is a great strength of Christianity compared to other monotheistic religions that it encourages such a focus on beliefs, and therefore on reasoning. He writes that Talmudic Judaism from the time of Christ on, as a case in point, is an orthoprax religion, as is Islam— concerned primarily with right (ortho) practice (prax) of the rules. Jewish and Islamic debates typically "involve whether some activity or innovation (such as reproducing holy scripture on a printing press) is consistent with established law". In contrast, Christianity is an ortho-dox religion that emphasizes

right (ortho) opinion or thinking (doxa). Christian debates tend to be over understanding, where understanding can always be improved by “discovering God’s nature, intentions, and demands, and on understanding how these define the relationship between human beings. Christianity is then a living religion that invites the application of reason to establish truth. And that’s a key reason the West with its Christianity ended up so much more successful than civilizations grounded in Judaism or Islam. I’m not enough of a history scholar to defend Rodney Stark’s thesis. But I want you to notice that this emphasis on thinking rightly about God has potential practical advantages.

Source of authority of the early councils and creeds

As I come to conclude, I do want to point out that we don’t see those early councils and creeds as binding because they were a council of the whole church, or because they were produced by such a council. That is not the source of their authority. The Roman Catholic church will think that way, but that’s not right. No, the conclusions of those early councils and of these creeds are binding only as far as they have rightly understood the implications of Scripture. It’s because they got the Scripture right that we embrace them. We still need to sit more loosely towards these creeds and these councils than we do towards the Scripture. I’m happy to say the wording of the Creeds here and there could be better, something I wouldn’t say of the Scripture. The Creeds could certainly be wrong, although I don’t think they are. Indeed, I’m happy enough with these Creeds to endorse them this morning as important systematic treatments of these themes of Scripture.

Conclusion

Let me conclude. Our God is a great God. He wants to be loved and adored for who he is. And he reveals himself in greatest detail through the person and saving work of his Son. My prayer is that with this detail we’ve looked at today, you can all the more marvel at him, the one who has paid for all your sins, even though you didn’t deserve it.

Nicene Creed

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

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
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 at 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.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting.
 Amen.

Athanasian Creed

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almightyies; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three

Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation; that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Essence of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Essence of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God; and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood by God. One altogether; not by confusion of Essence; but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies; And shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.