The Problem With Creeds
By Doy Moyer

Apostasy has always been an ugly monster hovering over the household of God. Paul warned about it often **(1 Tim. 4:1-5)**. Because of this, it is tempting for Christians to write up a list of positions on an issue or issues separate from the Bible, publish it in some way, then hold it up as a standard for judgment on others. Those who do not hold to the published position are cut off and marked (or at least eyed suspiciously).

The history of "Christendom" has been marked by the appearance of creeds (e.g., The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed being the most prominent from early centuries). The word creed is from the Latin *credo*, meaning, "I believe." Of course, there is nothing wrong in itself with stating a belief. This is, in fact, necessary if we will take a stand for truth. One might even agree generally with the teaching of the material in a creed; but a "creed" goes beyond stating a belief. It is essentially an authoritative statement of a particular position (or positions) to which others are *expected* to assent. The problem is not that it finds general agreement with a number of people. The problem is in how it becomes viewed.

The intent of a creed is to express essential biblical truth into which all must place their trust. They were usually written in times when error needed to be exposed, and so they served to warn of such dangers. Those who wrote creeds were not just attempting to write their opinions. They believed they were teaching essential truth. We all do this from time to time. So what is the problem? Are we making a creed every time we write an article? Are we making a creed when we oppose error? Does something become a creed because others agree with it? What are the real problems? Following are some of the problems I find associated with creeds.

First, they are not simply articles of truth, but they are stated for the purpose of safeguarding a fellowship of something greater than any local church. They stake out the

boundaries of fellowship on a broad, universal scale. While the intent is to expose error, the result is an extra-biblical document that draws the lines of fellowship for a brotherhood of believers. A creed crosses the local church lines with an implication that any churches or individuals who do not assent to the sentiments (if not the exact wording) of the document are to be considered dangerous and unworthy of fellowship universally. Fellowship, which is a local and individual issue, will take care of itself for the most part, if local churches are left to handle their own problems. On the universal level, fellowship is in the hands of God. A creed would remove it from God's hands and impose an orthodoxy over a brotherhood so that all can know who is sound and who is not. "With the development of heretical teaching, however, there was a natural tendency to use the creeds as a test of catholic orthodoxy" (Baker's Dictionary of Theology, p. 147). The word "catholic" means "universal." Creed-makers will not *say* that they are trying to force lines of fellowship or issue orthodoxy for a universal brotherhood, but this is exactly the effect.

Second, the creed is superimposed on Scripture. It is the formation of a succinct statement of truth, and becomes a sort of standard by which soundness will be measured for all. As long as one lines up to the view expressed in the creed (whether in the form of statements or questions), he is acceptable. Creed-makers violate the principle that the Bible is clear and sufficient, particularly on the boundaries of fellowship; they need a statement telling everyone else where those boundaries are. Whether intentionally or not, they are creating and employing something beyond the Scriptures to measure soundness throughout the brotherhood of believers. A creed will almost always contain something either more or less than the Bible itself. The preacher, Ben Franklin, wrote, "No man of intelligence will affirm, in plain terms, that the Bible is not sufficient for the government of the saints; or that man – uninspired man – can make a creed that will serve a better purpose than the Bible. Still such affirmations are implied in every attempt made by uninspired men to make a creed." In other words, creed-makers will not *say* that they are trying to superimpose something on the Bible, but this is exactly the effect.

Third, it assumes a position of authority that is unwarranted. A creed is "authoritative," but only from a human viewpoint, and only to certain people. Yet, what group or council of men has a right to

declare anything for anyone else but themselves? What gives any group of men on a broad scale (whether it is through a paper, college, or any other organized effort) a right to issue a statement to which they expect others to assent on the threat of disfellowship? Concerning creeds, Alexander Campbell argued, "They are called human, not merely because they are the production of human effort, but because they are also the offspring of human authority. No one can, in reason and truth, assign to them a divine authority; because no man can produce any precept or divine warrant for their manufacture. No apostle, prophet, or evangelist gave any authority to any church, community, or council, to furnish such a document" (Campbell-Rice Debate, p. 763).

Fourth, a creed is an instrument of division, not unity.

While the creed is a result of an organized attempt to unite, the reality is that it serves as a catalyst for broad-based divisions. A creed stirs up an unrest on a broad scale, and so has an impact on many congregations. Now the universal tone becomes "line up and divide," contributing to suspicion and division. They further the party, sectarian spirit (the "us" vs. "them" mentality: i.e., those who agree with the human document, and those who don't). I find it interesting that

Alexander Campbell affirmed the following proposition in debate with N.L. Rice: "Human Creeds, as Bonds of Union and Communion, are necessarily Heretical and Schismatical." Creeds will necessarily divide, not unite, because they involve parties of men lining up behind it and then defending the human document as if they are defending scripture.

Fifth, the historical tendency was to continue elaboration.

It became "difficult to stop the process of elaboration, and the continuing requirement of this or that new dogma on pain of eternal damnation could only enhance the power of the church, weaken true faith and its confession, and call forth from protesting or reforming groups opposing statements which had also to be given some measure of symbolic significance" (Baker 148). Any given issue has a plethora of attached issues with it. Some will agree to disagree on the peripheral points as long they agree on the central point (even though the peripheral points may have serious consequences themselves). At some point many will feel it necessary to elaborate and narrow down the qualifications for "acceptableness." That process becomes never-ending and self-defeating. There will always be "one more thing" to add to the list of acceptable positions.

Sixth, creeds are the result of over-reacting.

Let there be no mistake: Christians ought to oppose error **(cf. Titus 1:13)**. But creeds are the result of going too far the other direction by attempting to enforce orthodoxy. This, too, is error, even though it is done out of a genuine concern to protect truth and God's people. Yet, it has a destructive effect. One noted, "For every heretic who moves away from true doctrine in one direction, there is a well-meaning 'defender of the faith' who tried to defend orthodoxy by going to an equal and opposite extreme. Unfortunately, the 'defender of the faith' often pulls much of the church with him in his over-reaction. The end result is that the heretic succeeds in adulterating the church, but in the opposite way from what he started out" (Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, p. 133). By a sublime, perhaps even unintentional, attempt to activate a universal brotherhood, the supporters of a creed move into another kind of error.

Seventh, the nature of a creed is that it stifles Bible study.

By implementing a "do this or else" mentality, a creed will strangle any attempts to further study the particular issues involved. The creed makes it so that "this is the final answer, no ifs ands or buts," and any suggestions or questions to the contrary (even from meaningful Christians attempting to

study something out for themselves) is automatically put into the category of disingenuous efforts to compromise truth. While Christians ought not to compromise truth (Prov. 23:23), neither should they squelch honest attempts to study, even if such study must delve into differing positions. Anything that would effectively end open study is dangerous and wrong.

Eighth, creeds encourage people to place too much trust in men.

By using a human document to line people up on sides, one is forced to trust that everything said in that document is without error, including any expressed opinions. Some will fall in line with the document because it appears so authoritative and confident, but they will not check out and verify for themselves everything taught therein. This is a dangerous situation indeed. The problem with creeds is not opposition to error; nor does it have to do with the fact that a number of people support it. One can agree with the basic sentiments expressed in a creed (e.g., the Nicene Creed and the Deity of Christ). But the issue with a creed is that it oversteps the line of teaching and authority altogether, and steps upon the hands of God, who alone has universal authority to tell us what we are to believe and practice. *The creed becomes more than*

one's studied conclusions by which others may be edified; it becomes a standard of orthodoxy by which others are judged as being faithful or unfaithful.
How can we avoid these problems?
Here are at least a few suggestions:
1. Let local churches handle their own issues of fellowship. Teach what you believe to be the truth, and let the chips fall where they may, but let local churches handle their own affairs. Each congregation is responsible before God for handling fellowship **(e.g, 1 Cor. 5).**

2. Avoid a "do this or else" mentality. If the Bible says, "do this or else," that is one thing, and of course we can teach it that way (e.g., 2 Thess. 1:7-9). But I'm talking about issuing ultimatums, aside from the Bible, that God Himself is not giving. This effectively squelches Bible study; and Christians have no right to issue universal dictums or ultimatums. After all, who will enforce these ultimatums?

3. Take a balanced approach to the issues at hand. One should not be weak in dealing with error, but "jumping the fence" to another extreme is not justified either. The ends do not justify the means when it comes to fighting error.

4. Be committed to your local situation. Do not be so concerned about what is going on throughout the brotherhood that you neglect where you are. While one can take advantage of opportunities to teach when and where he can, it is important to remember where he is and why he is there.
5. Avoid the party spirit mentality. Political tactics that seek to line up a bunch of people in order to show some kind of power is without God's authority. To write a document, then solicit support for it in order to gain a particular end, is political maneuvering. Why else would clout in numbers be sought? If one is simply publishing his own studied conclusions, it wouldn't matter to him how many agree (though it's fine if others do agree). Christians can be susceptible to this if they drop their guard, for we generally feel safe in numbers. Creeds are products of the party mentality.

6. Let God's word be your creed. It alone is our standard of faith, practice, and judgment **(Heb. 4:12).** What the apostles and prophets wrote do have universal implications, for they wrote God's commands by God's inspiration **(cf. 1 Cor. 14:37)**. Let it alone define orthodoxy. Let it be the guide to practice and fellowship.

7. Keep the works of men in perspective. Of course I believe (*credo*) that men have a right to publish their studies and conclusions (e.g., through papers,

books, the internet, etc.). All have a right to express concerns and state convictions. Others have a right to agree or disagree with those conclusions. Just remember: they are still the works of men (as is this article). As such, they are not infallible and inerrant. They are not on par with the Bible. They do not carry the weight of scripture. And they certainly should not be used as a catalyst for division, or as a standard for orthodoxy. They can be useful for study purposes, but if they go beyond that point, they enter an unauthorized realm reserved only for God and His word.

A creed is a sectarian trap. If not careful, Christians may fall prey to the allurement of a document, aside from the Bible, that carries the weight of a respected body of men, and seeks to impose their will and orthodoxy on others. Instead, constant reaffirmation of the all-sufficiency of Scripture is needed. Each Christian must study for himself, and rest his confidence in the word of God. May God help us fight error, but may He also help us to fight it without going too far the other direction. A creed does just that, and is just as much in error as any error it attempts to squelch.

(Editor's Note: This article is a bit longer than we normally print. However, it is so relevant to our religious world today that we thought it would be good to print it all at one time. Thank you for reading it and we pray that you might use this in your personal studies.)