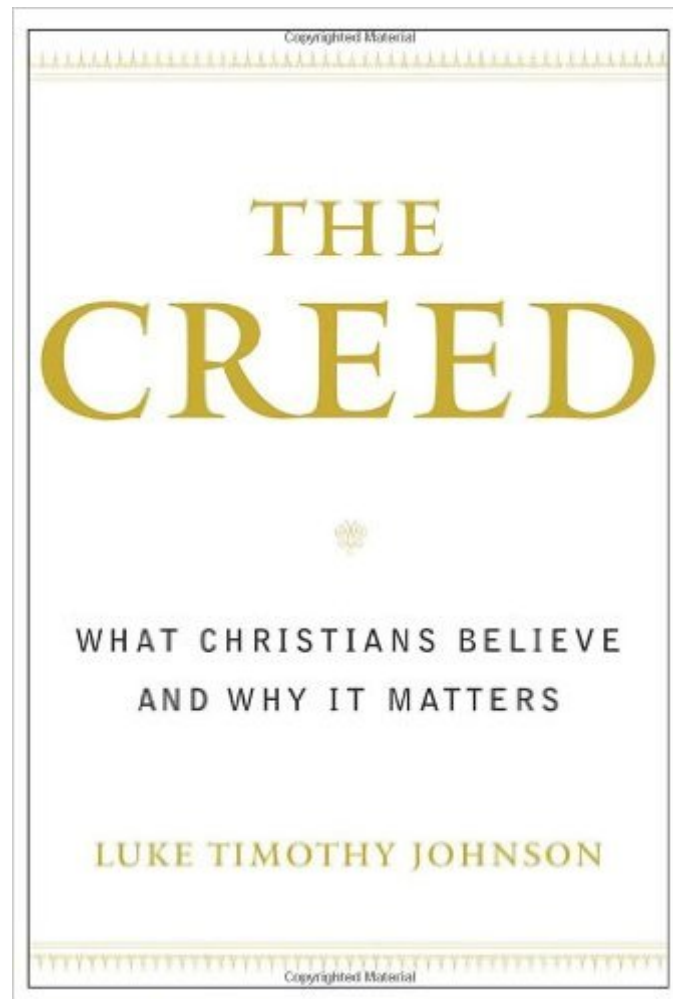


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The Creed: What Christians Believe And Why It Matters



Synopsis

This thoughtful, fully accessible exploration of the creed, the list of beliefs central to the Christian faith, delves into its origins and illuminates the contemporary significance of why it still matters. During services in Christian communities, the members of the congregation stand together to recite the creed, professing in unison the beliefs they share. For most Christians, the creed functions as a sort of "ABC" of what it means to be a Christian and to be part of a worldwide movement. Few people, however, know the source of this litany of beliefs, a topic that is further confused by the fact that there are two different versions: the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. In *The Creed*, Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar and Catholic theologian, clarifies the history of the creed, discussing its evolution from the first decades of the Christian Church to the present day. By connecting the deep theological conflicts of the early Church with the conflicts and questions facing Christians today, Johnson shows that faith is a dynamic process, not based on a static set of rules. Written in a clear, graceful style and appropriate for Christians of all denominations, *The Creed* is destined to become a classic of modern writings on spirituality.

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Customer Reviews

Truth in advertising compels me to confess that Luke Timothy Johnson was a professor of mine during my undergraduate years - I took several classes from him in the Religious Studies field while an undergraduate at Indiana University; I have used his books consistently both as a student and as an instructor, and they have been of a consistently high quality in scholarship and readability. Many

of Johnson's text deal with the New Testament directly, or with issues deriving from it (explorations of Jesus, early church studies, etc.). This book, 'The Creed', combines a lot of this kind of scholarship into an overall discussion of the creeds the modern church espouses. Johnson, a life-long Roman Catholic, has had the recitation of the creed as part of his regular worship experiences all his life - first in Latin, then later in English. Many Christians Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant share this kind of experience. Often faithfulness is a response to God, but Johnson has in this text developed more along the lines of faith as belief, as giving a common sense of purpose and identity. In the preface, Johnson states his belief, his faith that the creed may be a most important element in helping the church to recover its sense of itself. Johnson identifies the pervasive character of modern philosophical thinking from the Enlightenment through to Modernity as rather inimical to the kind of faith the creed called for when first formulated by the early church. The world is now set up in many ways in duality between belief and inquiry, and rarely do the two intersect happily. Not only is creedal Christianity a subject of criticism from outside Christian culture, but is also a controversial topic within - how are the creeds to be interpreted and applied? How vital are they? It is not simply the type of Jesus Seminar scholarship that makes belief problematic, according to Johnson; committed Christians such as Anabaptists and Free Church traditions distrust the politics behind the creedal constructions. However, Johnson's specific audience is more toward another - those persons who still take the creed seriously, but find it difficult to accept all of the assertions, all of the statements or all of the language of the ancient statement of faith. Johnson draws some comparisons and contrasts with other religions - Judaism and Islam have less formal structures of belief despite highly developed systems of law and practice; Buddhism and Hinduism similarly have less focus on particular intellectual belief structures. Johnson traces the origins of the creed in different strands of practice and belief surrounding the early church, even prior to the gospels being committed to paper, and certainly prior to the canon of scripture being codified in final forms as it exists today. In the second and third centuries, more pronounced developments in liturgy and theology led to further codification, and ironically further ambiguity and controversy, necessitating various ecumenical councils that eventually led to the formulation of the creed most commonly recited today, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, usually referred to simply as the Nicene Creed (which is an historical inaccuracy, given that there was an earlier Nicene Creed, from which this later one developed). This is the creed of the title of this text. Johnson explores the ways in which the creed acts for the church as a profession of faith, a rule of faith, a definition of faith, and a symbol of faith. The creed also serves as a narrative recitation of the Christian idea, an interpretative lens for scripture, and a guide to practice and worship. These roles for the creed are

important individually and collectively, showing much more depth to the creed than the average person reciting it in the liturgy might realise. Johnson then explores the creed section by section, developing the different lines. From the start, there is a point of ambiguity - does one state 'I believe', or 'we believe'? Johnson argues for the plural, 'we believe', as being a means by which individuals can be part of a communal belief and experience, to an historical community 'that believes more and better than any one of them [the individuals] does'. These are statements of faith that cannot be proven - one of the problems of scholarship such as the Jesus Seminar is it seeks a type of assured knowledge the creed was never intended to supply. The statements of faith are affirmative statements about what the reciting Christian believes; they of course imply what the Christian does not believe. There are areas of disagreement and some freedom of interpretation even from the creedal statements, but Johnson argues for a fairly tradition and careful rendering, even as the modern situation is acknowledged as having validity in certain areas, too. One might be surprised to reach the final chapter, some three hundred pages into the text, to find Johnson say that all up to that point has simply been introduction. The real argument and heart of the text is here, with Johnson arguing for the creed as a defining and boundary-marking set of statements, not designed to exclude, but rather to identify. Again, Johnson's mistrust of historical Jesus enterprises is raised here; Johnson calls this the 'longest-running of all Christological heresies', which seems to have arisen with little reaction from the church (in fact, I believe this to be an underestimation; it is true that there have been no grand councils called to address the issue, but it is also true that the controversy is worked out in different ways in many churches throughout Christendom). This is not a book simply for Roman Catholics or Anglicans or Orthodoxers - any Christian will find wisdom of value here. Johnson mentions a parish (St. Charles Borromeo, in Bloomington) where I have attended many times as being a place that helped him formulate this text. The text has been used in several churches of my acquaintance to good effect.

Maybe 3 and a half stars. Luke Timothy Johnson is a moderately conservative neo-orthodox Roman Catholic. A world-class Biblical scholar teaching at (liberal Methodist) Emory. There are some VERY outstanding new books on the Creed: Alister McGrath's *I Believe*; Van Harn, ed., *Exploring and Proclaiming The Apostles' Creed* [2004]; Michael Horton, *We Believe*, and the last section of David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life* [2004]. If I bought just two, one would be Johnson's. McGrath and Horton's works are certainly more orthodox in spots. (For example, 'born of the Virgin Mary': Horton and McGrath believe that the Creed is right on that, while Johnson strongly hedges.) But Johnson makes up for shaky orthodoxy in style, precision, and clarity. His introduction is the best part of the

book. His defense of creeds, against Modernity on one hand and Anabaptists on the other, is alone worth the \$10. Pleasant cover and packaging too.

This book was given to me by my father as a gift after I expressed interest in possibly pursuing an advanced degree in Christian theology or apologetics. It was an excellent choice because it deals with one of the fundamental Christian creeds - the Nicene creed. Overall, the author's presentation about the subject was strong, but I did find a few sections somewhat tangential. The author states that his aim in writing this book is "to make the creed controversial for those Christians who say it, but do not understand it, and therefore, do not grasp what a radical and offensive act they perform when they declare these words every week in a public assembly". Oddly enough, the church I attend actually does not recite the Creed during weekly services. None the less, I was very interested to see how the author goes about fulfilling his aim. The bulk of the book focuses on a line by line analysis of the Creed, and the fundamental doctrines it represents. Basically, the book illustrates how different the Christian view is from other religions, and the world we in which we exist. Additionally, the author feels like the Creed should be a unifying way to help the Church find common ground. He realizes that the Body contains diverse views throughout, but he proves the point that the Creed helped unify the early church, and it can do the same today. Additionally, the author offers analysis of various denominations approaches to certain doctrines, such as baptism, the Holy Spirit, and the accuracy of the Bible. It is these sections which are not all successful. For example, pointing out that the modern charismatic movement does a better job of including the Holy Spirit in their doctrine, but go overboard on the issue of speaking in tongues is insightful. On the other hand, worrying about the current gender discussion (whether to use more inclusive language in the Bible) seems out of place. It is as if the author wants to focus on the basics, but cannot help going after peripheral topics. I found this distracting at times. I do recommend this book to anyone wanting to learn about the history and meaning of the Creed. I had not thought much about the Creed since our church does not use it, so this book was very helpful to me.

Luke Timothy Johnson does a superb job describing the history and early function of the Nicene Creed, then he skillfully produces compelling arguments for modern day functions of the Creed for all Christians who confess Christ as Lord. Although it may be a bit idealistic of me, I think The Creed could potentially close the gap that formed in the Church as a result of the Protestant Reformation. A must read for all Christians who believed Jesus wanted unity in his body when he prayed in John 17.

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