

# The Apostles' Creed

LESSON  
ONE

The Articles of Faith  
Faculty Forum



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# The Apostles' Creed

## Lesson One: The Articles of Faith

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Stephen Blakemore  
Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III  
Dr. Dennis Johnson  
Dr. Keith Johnson  
Dr. Peter Kuzmič  
Dr. Samuel Ling

Dr. Robert Lister  
Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.  
Dr. John Oswalt  
Dr. J. I. Packer  
Dr. Jonathan Pennington  
Dr. Robert Plummer

Dr. Mark Strauss  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Peter Walker

### Question 1:

#### Why should we pay attention to a document like the Apostles' Creed?

One of the first questions that comes up in any study of the Apostles' Creed is, "Why should we study the Apostles' Creed?" Why should we be interested in what early Christians put in a few short lines that they memorized and occasionally recited? Many churches strongly resist using any traditional summary of Christian beliefs. They argue that all we need for a creed is the Bible. So, it is important to ask why we should pay attention to a document like the Apostles' Creed.

#### **Dr. Jonathan Pennington**

Although creeds and confessions have always been a part of the church's self-understanding and worship and theologizing, there is unfortunately a strain, especially within Protestantism, the Protestant version of Christianity, in which there is a rejection of the importance of creeds. Sometimes this is described under a banner such as "no creed but Jesus," and the idea here is that theology is a wrong addition to just believing the Bible and trusting in it. The problem with that — and this is why the Apostles' Creed is so important as a corrective to this — is that in reality we are all within a tradition, that it is impossible not to have a tradition that is influencing our understanding of how we read Scripture. Moreover, not only are we all in a tradition, there is a great tradition called Orthodoxy that has always been adhered to by God's faithful people throughout the ages. The Apostles' Creed and the particular doctrines that it lists are very crucial, foundational, orthodox understandings of the great tradition.

#### **Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The Apostles' Creed gives us fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. These are the things that define Christianity. Without these you don't have the essential teachings that give Christianity its very foundational identity.

**Question 2:****Doesn't a focus on creeds somehow challenge our commitment to Scripture as our only absolute standard of truth?**

Nearly all Christian traditions are united in the idea that Christians, to the best of their ability, need to know and affirm the central tenets that the Bible teaches. We need to know who God is, what he has done, what he continues to do, what he will do in the future, and how he expects us to respond to him. And for almost 2,000 years, much of the church has used creeds to ensure that its members have this kind of basic knowledge of the Bible. But does this use of creeds somehow challenge our commitment to Scripture as our only absolute standard of truth?

**Dr. Jonathan Pennington**

Now part of the Protestant tradition is an emphasis on what we may call *sola Scriptura*, the Scriptures alone. And it's from this important reformational idea, the centrality of the Bible in our worship, theology, and practice, from this understanding, comes unfortunately this idea that we don't need the creeds, creeds such as the Apostles' Creed. But this is a misunderstanding of this Reformation principle. For the Reformers and for Christians throughout the ages, they have understood the Scriptures to be the source and witness to divine revelation. But this has never meant for Christians that we don't need traditions, nor that we aren't standing in a particular tradition ourselves. So this idea that *sola Scriptura* would mean a rejection of all creeds except for one's own reading the Bible, is simply not what the Reformers meant, nor is it a wise way forward.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Protestants traditionally have understood the relationship between the authority of the church and the authority of the Bible in a number of ways. I mean, firstly, in terms of its formation, it was the church that actually came up with the verification of what was thought to be the Canon, the authorized text, the Bible. But it is also true to say that the church should be submissive to the teaching of the Bible, so the interpreters of the Bible are the humble people who read it wisely, not a dictate from afar, and therefore, the church's relationship to the Bible is one in which it should see itself being guided and directed in all matters of life and doctrine and practice by the Bible.

**Dr. Robert Plummer**

Just as Christians today continue to write books whether they're doctrinal studies or personal testimonies or letters, early Christians, after the apostolic period, after the writing of the New Testament, continued to write additional documents, letters to churches, instructional manuals like the *Didache*. The Scripture is our authority and so in so far as those documents represent an attempt to faithfully live out the Scriptures, it's instructive to us to learn about how our brothers and sisters in ancient times sought to live and apply the gospel.

**Question 3:****Why was only one creed called The Apostles' Creed?**

Creeds can be both biblical and useful for giving us access to the wisdom that the Holy Spirit has given his church, we have to remember that there are many creeds, catechisms and confessions that try to be true to the teachings of Jesus' apostles. So, why was only one creed called the Apostles' Creed?

**Dr. Peter Walker**

Well, despite its name, the Apostles Creed was not written by the apostles. The last apostle, John, probably died in about A.D. 90. And the Apostles Creed probably dates to about 180 A.D. the first time that we actually hear it being promoted. So, the important thing is, the early church was trying to reflect the faith of the apostles. It was apostolic in that sense. And it was very important to them, because of so many different challenges to the faith they needed something which summarized that apostolic faith as easily as possible.

**Question 4:****Why was it important for the early church to summarize the teachings of the New Testament in a simple document like the Apostles' Creed?**

Of course, the apostles and their immediate disciples left us many writings, which we have in the New Testament. But since the early church had these authoritative writings, why did they think it was important to summarize the teachings of the New Testament in a simple document like the Apostles' Creed?

**Dr. Jonathan Pennington**

From the earliest days Christians understood the Scriptures as the source of divine revelation, the unique source that God revealed to himself, now ultimately in Jesus Christ in the Scriptures as the witness to that. But the problem is that as soon as you start to ask, "What do the Scriptures teach?" you find that just having the Bible alone isn't sufficient because each of the heretical groups — say, the Gnostics and the Donatists and the Montanists — all also used Scripture and argued that their understanding was a function of what the Scriptures were teaching as well. And so, from the earliest days, the Christians began to say something more than what the Bible said, that is in these creeds and confessions — not to supplant the Bible as something that wasn't sufficient, but in realization that what the Bible says needs to be explained. And from the earliest days this was called, among many of the early church fathers, the *regula fide*, or the "rule of faith." And you can find this in many of the early authors, but one of the most famous ones is a man named Irenaeus. And he used this very striking and memorable illustration. He said that bits and pieces of the Bible are like tiles that make up a mosaic. And you can take tiles from a mosaic and put them together into many different pictures. But what you need to make the right picture is a key, or the Greek word, a "hypothesis," that shows you what is the correct way to put the tiles together to make the correct picture. What Irenaeus' argument

was, that the heretics of his own day, the ones who were also using the Scriptures and arguing from the Scriptures, what they meant but were understanding them incorrectly, what they did was they made a wrong picture. And he famously said they turned the picture of Jesus into that of a fox rather than that of a King. And so, again, the issue is that we need to not just have the Bible, even though that is the source of divine revelation, we need help to understand what is a proper reading of the Bible. And creeds and confessions, one of the earliest being the Apostles' Creed, are a great help to that end.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

In addition to responding to false teaching, the creed was used in worship contexts as people were baptized and people would recite the creed to solidify understanding people had of the Scriptures. Most people didn't have their own Bibles and so we needed to have a clear teaching of Christian teaching for people to reiterate when they would gather as the church to emphasize what we believe.

**Question 5:**

**Why did the early church think it was valuable to provide a systematic way of thinking about doctrine?**

**As an organized collection of important doctrines that Christians should affirm, the Apostles' Creed is one of the early ways that the church systemized the teachings of the Scriptures. But why did the early church think it was valuable to provide a systematic way of thinking about doctrine?**

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

Well, systematic theology is really important for the church because when we're doing systematic theology we're trying to gain the mind of God on a particular topic and issue, to bring together the breadth of what's said in a number of different places in the Bible. So if you're wanting to find out the nature of the person of Christ, then you don't just go to one text in the Bible in order to understand that, but you need a composite picture that's built up from the various truths that are put across the Bible. So we need that systematizing of our thought to give us a framework which will help us understand how the whole Bible fits together, and to be able to think clearly about particular issues.

**Dr. Peter Kuzmič**

Christians have to think "Christianly." Biblically. That is possible only if we have the renewed mind, and if we have a well-thought-out worldview. Germans have this wonderful word, "*weltanschauung*," the way we look at the world, at the mass of data that is so often contradictory. How do we interpret that? So, the question of truth, of course, is central to worldview. If we have not resolved the question of truth, if we are not able to see how God rules over everything because he is the source of truth, he is the truth — he is the source of all wisdom. If we don't have that epistemological base, if we have not resolved that as a fundamental issue, we have no base for ethics,

for morality, for value system. Values depend on truth. So, theology, philosophy becomes foundational for ethics — how we behave. It's the truth applied that is ethics. And because we live in our era of moral permissiveness, in our era of post-modernity and relativization of everything, it is extremely important that young Christians especially be provided with the kind of training, instruction, teaching, where pieces in their minds fit together. Where they don't live some kind of a schizophrenic existence where they don't have just a religion on a Sunday, and then unrelated to what happens on Monday. It's very important that we provide that kind of training and teaching that helps people build a comprehensive, biblical worldview, which then translates into a value system and consistent behavior.

### **Question 6:**

#### **Why should modern Christians use an ancient creed instead of writing their own?**

**The Apostles' Creed was a great help to the early church when it came to summarizing and explaining the truths of Scripture. But that may still leave some Christians wondering why we should value it today. Why should modern Christians use an ancient creed instead of writing their own? Well, for one thing, the Apostles' Creed is used widely throughout the church, making it a good way for us to affirm our unity as Christians. But this creed is especially valuable precisely because it is so ancient; it comes from the very early church.**

#### **Dr. Stephen Blakemore**

Well when you think about the relationship of the creeds, the Apostles' Creed for instance, and its relationship to the Scripture, one of the things that's very important to remember is that the Scriptures were written in the apostolic era. And before they were written, there was an oral tradition of teaching about the gospel. The teaching of the apostles was what formed the church. The Scriptures, you could say, grew out of the teaching of the apostles. And because they grew out of the teaching of the apostles, the Scriptures are a sort of occasional unpacking or statement about this apostolic teaching. Now of course the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are inerrant in what they teach us about the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of our relationship to God, and the world. And so, thinking about this we need to understand that the creeds themselves are not just sort of shorthand summarizations of the New Testament, but instead are a part of the dynamic apostolic witness that was a part of the first century church's life. We know this to be the case from the statement of people like St. Irenaeus who, in one of his writings says, "even if the apostles had not left us their writings, we had the rule of faith which was handed down to us from them." And when you begin to examine what the rule of faith was, it is essentially the Apostles' Creed as we now have it.

**Question 7:****Why does the creed place such a strong emphasis on the doctrine of God? What's so critical about this doctrine?**

As we look at the way the Apostles' Creed summarizes the apostolic teaching of Scripture, the first thing we notice is that it begins with the doctrine of God. And in fact, the entire creed is structured according to a Trinitarian model, beginning with the Father and his works, moving to the Son and his life and work, and ending with the Holy Spirit and his areas of ministry. But with so many things in the Bible that it could talk about, why does the creed place such a strong emphasis on the doctrine of God? What's so critical about this doctrine?

**Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III**

Well, the doctrine of God is of vital importance to every Christian for a variety of reasons. One is that there are two types of people in this world. The world is not divided between believers and unbelievers. It's divided between worshippers of the true God and worshippers of gods of their own making. In other words, it's divided between true believers, those who know and love and serve and worship and delight in and treasure and follow the true God. And it's those who are idolaters. And therefore we need the correction of Scripture so that we'll understand the true God. So, theology and who God is, is vital for that reason. It's also vital because Protestants have stressed for five hundred years now that the doctrine of God is important not only in and of itself, but because all other doctrines have to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. The Protestant doctrine of God is not substantially different from the Eastern Orthodox or the Roman Catholic doctrine of God. And at the same time it's the most unique Protestant doctrine because Protestants believe that every other doctrine of the Bible has to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. So, "theology proper" — is what theologians call the doctrine of God — is vital for every believer, and every believer has a doctrine of God whether they think of themselves as theologians or not. And that doctrine of God is vital for the way they live the Christian life.

**Question 8:****Does our doctrine of God really affect how we live? What practical differences do our beliefs about God actually make in our lives?**

Now, even though we recognize the centrality the doctrine of God plays in Christian theology, it can still be hard to imagine ways that it impacts our daily living. Does our doctrine of God really affect how we live? What practical differences do our beliefs about God actually make in our lives?

**Dr. Samuel Ling**

The Doctrine of God is so important for Christian faith, life and ministry. For example, in our evangelism, if we presuppose that God is all free and sovereign, he's

all-powerful and that he's ruling his own people to himself, then we're going to know that Christ's sheep is going to come into his fold in his good time. If we assume that God is limited in his power then we might rely a bit more on what human beings do or what Christians do in evangelism. It also is very important what we think about God in his justice, where people are suffering in pain. Is God fair? Is God going to straighten out the pain and suffering and injustices in this world? If God's justice is infinite and eternal, then we know that he is going to wipe away all tears as Revelation 21 tells us. So, it's very, very important to know that God is both all-powerful, he is sitting on his throne and yet, he is here present with us near everyone who trusts him and loves him.

### **Question 9:**

#### **Where does the Bible teach the doctrine of the Trinity?**

**Realizing that the doctrine of God is fundamental to all of Christian theology and life, we should pause to focus on one of the most distinctive aspects of the Christian doctrine of God: the idea that God exists in Trinity. Unbelievers have sometimes accused the church of inventing this doctrine, saying that it can't be found in the Bible. But Christians have always insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity is fully scriptural. So, where does the Bible teach this important doctrine?**

#### **Dr. J. I. Packer**

Well, the truth of the Trinity, which is that God is as truly "they" — three persons — as he is "he." It's awkward to say it in terms of grammar, but that's how the New Testament puts it really. The truth of the Trinity is there in solution in the New Testament in the way that if I stir sugar into my cup of tea, the sugar is there in solution, in the liquid. And the truth of the Trinity was crystallized out of the New Testament through all sorts of queries and debates about it that occupied the church for the first four centuries after the Lord had risen and the Spirit had come. You can say it this way, you have the Lord Jesus as the focus of faith and discipleship, but the Lord Jesus distinguishes himself from his heavenly father at whose command he is on earth administering. He is himself, God to be worshipped. When finally after his resurrection Thomas says to him, "My Lord and My God," he doesn't say, "Now don't call me that." He accepts it. "My Lord and My God" is the right way to acknowledge who he is. But he is distinct from his heavenly Father. And then, before he left his disciples, he promised that he would send the Holy Spirit, as someone distinct from himself and from the Father. He says both that the Father sends the Spirit and that he himself sends the Spirit. So there you are. In the teaching of the Lord Jesus you've got the three persons. And in the teaching of the apostles, you've got the three persons. As I said, the doctrine is in solution throughout the whole New Testament. And when it has to be crystallized, well, out comes the formula, "he" is "they" — Father, Son, and Spirit — and "they" — Father, Son, and Spirit — are "he," the one God. It's mysterious; we don't know how it can be. But from biblical testimony, which is unambiguous; we know that it is. And there are lots of things in Christianity of which one has to say the same thing — truths about God — I don't

know how it can be, but I know that it is because the Bible tells me so.

### **Question 10:**

## **Why did the early church concentrate so much attention on the doctrine of the Trinity?**

**There should be no question that the doctrine of the Trinity is true to Scripture. But there should also be no question that it's a difficult doctrine that took the church hundreds of years to define clearly. What was their motivation? Why did the early church concentrate so much attention on the doctrine of the Trinity?**

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

The Trinity does look a very complex doctrine, and people think, how could that possibly be true to the simple truths of the Bible? But in reality the New Testament Christians, they found almost immediately that they were worshipping God in three forms. They knew God as Father; they wanted to worship Jesus Christ as Son; they experienced the life changing power of the Spirit. And in the New Testament, without sort of theologizing about it too much, the apostles just naturally talk about God in three ways. You can find sentences which all refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. And what the doctrine of the Trinity is, its' just drawing out again what is there in the biblical Narrative. They're saying you can't speak about God truly, except doing so in three ways. Of course it's a little bit complicated. Philosophically they have to try and workout how to match out the concept of God, philosophically with this doctrine of the Trinity. But it's trying to reflect this natural experience of Christians of knowing God in three ways. And that's true to the New Testament.

#### **Dr. Keith Johnson**

We need to remember that the first Christians were Jews who inherited from the Old Testament a conviction that God is one. Yet, these very same Jews worshiped the risen Christ as God. How can this be? Well, a number of wrong answers were explored along the way and I'll briefly mention two. First, some Christians suggested that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely faces that God wears as he relates to humans. Yet, there's significant problems with this idea. If Father and Son are merely faces God wears, then to whom did Jesus pray? And to whom did Jesus offer his sacrifice on the cross? Christians recognize that the gospel narratives clearly suggest personal distinctions among the Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is distinct from the Son and the Son is distinct from the Father. Another wrong answer was simply to deny that Jesus is divine. A Christian leader named Arius proposed this and was condemned at the council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The Christian leaders at Nicaea recognized that the Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus is divine. They expressed this by saying that the Son is of the same nature as the Father. How then did Christians reconcile worship of Christ with the oneness of God? The key was a distinction between person and nature. Eventually Christians were led by Scripture to affirm that God the Father and God the Son are one in being, yet distinct in person. To summarize, one God eternally exists in a unity of being as three persons, Father, Son

and Holy Spirit.

### **Question 11:**

**What are the logical relationships among the various systematic teachings of the creed? How do they all fit together?**

**When we look at the Apostles' Creed, it is clear that it addresses more teachings than just the Trinity. What are the logical relationships among the various systematic teachings of the creed? How do they all fit together?**

#### **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**

The wonderful thing about the Apostles' Creed is that it gives us such a summary of Christian doctrine. We start with the fatherhood of God, and end up with the life everlasting. But between that there are all these points of doctrine that are so important to us. Everything from the virgin conception of Christ, to his atoning death, to the reality of the fellowship of the saints, it's all in there. But let's remember something; it's there in the form of a story. It's not just there as a group of, say, doctrines thrown into a bag, it's a story that we can remember at every point in our lives. We start out with the story of Jesus. "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who..." and there follows the story of the gospel. It's just a reminder to us that the gospel itself is indeed truth, the most precious truth we could possibly know. But it too is a story about God's love for us; his love for us in Christ, and all that that brings to us. You know, these precious truths are so important to us, and thinking of the creed as a creed is very important, because I've find it so moving in my heart to realize I'm saying what Christians through the centuries have said. I'm believing what all true believers throughout all the generations have said. I am believing what men and women, eventually from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, will say. And you know, when we say these things, we're not only going to be saying just isolated points of doctrine we know to be true, we're going to be telling a story together. I think that's really important.

### **Question 12:**

**Why does the creed only mention personal salvation after going through so many other biblical teachings?**

**Early on, the Apostles' Creed was used in baptism ceremonies. Why then does the creed only mention personal salvation after going through so many other biblical teachings? Why is the salvation of individual people such a minor part of the creed?**

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

Yes, you have to wait a long time before you get to the forgiveness of sins, but it's such a key thing, but it's right at the end of the creed. I think it's the important thing to remember is that for the early church it was absolutely vital to get it on, to get it

clearly articulated who Jesus was. The creed actually goes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It starts to speak the truth about who God is and how he's known as Father, Son, and Spirit. And in particular, that Christ is not just a human being but is also divine. Now that was important because salvation, forgiveness it comes through the cross and it doesn't come to us if Jesus is just a human being. Therefore, it's very important to say, on the cross when Jesus dies he is the Son of God. Because he is that, he's able to bring us forgiveness of sins. And that's why the creed goes in the correct order. Work out who Jesus is, get the person of Christ sorted, and then the work of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, salvation, they will flow out from that. So the creed's right in its order, although we have to wait a little while before we get to that key point, forgiveness of sins.

### **Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III**

I think that when western Christians look at the Apostles' Creed, a couple of things immediately come to mind. First of all they look at and it's very obviously shaped them around the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the bulk of the questions of the creed focusing on the person of the Son and then with a series of affirmations that come at the very end about our belief in the forgiveness of sins and things of this nature. And we typically, as western evangelicals, associate those things listed at the very end of the creed with what theologians call "soteriology" or the doctrines of salvation. We are unique in that because the Christians that first utilized the creed — and the creed came together over the course of about four centuries growing out of what the early church theologians called the *regula*, or the rule of faith — those Christians that first utilized the creed would have viewed the whole of the creed as soteriological. They would have believed that what we think about God, what we think about Jesus, and what we think about the Holy Spirit are directly soteriological. Christology, especially for the early Christians, was soteriology. If we had been having a conversation with Athanasius in the early fourth century, and we had said to him, "Athanasius, I really love your Christology, especially the way you emphasize the deity of Christ and the full equality of Jesus, the *Logos*, with the eternal Father. But I'm really interested to know, tell me a little bit about your soteriology." Athanasius would have looked at us quizzically, because for Athanasius, Christology is soteriology.

And for the Eastern Church, it's still that way to this very day. The Eastern Church's theology developed until about the eighth century and focused on Christology and is very much still fixed in the same forms and categories that it existed in the eighth century. And so for them, Christology is soteriology. So I think one important thing for evangelicals to do, is recognize when you're making affirmations about the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is not only not irrelevant to soteriology or to the doctrines of salvation, it is actually integrally connected and absolutely essential to the doctrine of salvation. So, the creed actually is getting at questions of salvation from the very first clause, but especially when it gets into the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Because the battleground of salvation in the early church was not on what we would call today the *ordo salutis*, or justification and sanctification and adoption and these things, the battleground for the Christian doctrine of salvation in the early days of the

church, was on the person and work of Christ. So when Athanasius was responding to Arius, and Arius was denying the full equality of the Son with the Father, Athanasius saw that not as an abstract, theoretical, speculative, ontological discussion that has nothing to do of our salvation. He saw it as absolutely, inescapably connected to the doctrine of salvation and if Jesus is not fully divine and equal with the Father, ontologically, then he is not capable of being the Savior of the world. And so salvation and the doctrine of Christ were inseparably linked together. So I think that's one thing that we need to recognize when we ask questions about the creed and what it teaches about Christ and what it teaches about salvation. Christ and salvation go together.

### **Question 13:**

#### **How does the Apostles' Creed demonstrate that early Christians believed in the theological unity of the Scriptures?**

**One of the interesting things about the Apostles' Creed is that when it summarizes the teaching of the Scriptures, it seems to assume that the Bible as a whole supports its articles of faith. And this reflects a crucial outlook held by the early church, the belief that the Bible is unified in its teachings. How does the Apostles' Creed demonstrate that early Christians believed in the theological unity of the Scriptures?**

#### **Dr. John Oswalt**

One of the very important issues for the church is the recognition that the Old Testament and the New Testament are in full agreement as regards doctrine. One of the things that I like to say to my students is that, in fact, the two testaments supplement each other. The Old Testament emphasizes certain things and treats other things as somewhat minor themes. In a real way, the New Testament reverses those and makes the Old Testament's minor themes the major themes. An example would be transcendence. The Old Testament is working very, very hard to say that God is not this world. He is *other* than this world; he transcends it. The New Testament writers, I think, are saying, okay, our readers have gotten that point; now, let's talk about the fact that this transcendent God is everywhere present in this world — the technical term being “immanence,” of course. But if you don't know your Old Testament and only know the New Testament, you may very easily reduce God to a friendly little God who is present with me to make my prayers come true. That can't happen if you know the Old Testament. If you know that God is truly other than this world, he is beyond anything that we can imagine, and then you're told that God has become one with us, that's wonderful good news. I think in many areas, you can see that kind of pairing where the emphases are different, but the fundamental understandings are the same. So you can talk about God's justice in the Old Testament. In a pagan world, there really is no clear line of cause and effect in this world. What you do here really is shaped by something that happened in the invisible world and who knows what the effects will be. The Old Testament is saying, no, God is a God of cause and effect and we have choices to make here in this world and there

are just effects of that. God is just. Then the New Testament can come along and say, yes, and this just God is incredibly merciful. If you know God's justice, then again, his mercy is great good news. But if you are not really steeped in a knowledge of his justice, then his mercy simply becomes sort of a candy from Grandpa — "Oh well, I deserve it anyhow; I'm a nice child." So, the two Testaments are essential to understanding each other. I think another point that needs to be made here is the Old Testament asks the questions and the New Testament provides the answers. Reading the New Testament alone is a little bit like doing Jeopardy. You know the answers, but what are the questions? And oftentimes, the church has fallen into a trap because it has gotten the answers and assumed it knew the question, but in fact did not.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

The New Testament definitely demonstrates doctrinal unity with the Old Testament. We have to stress, first of all, there is great diversity within the New Testament and Old Testament themselves — diversity of authorship, diversity of genre, diversity of even of theological perspectives — but ultimately there is unity, an inherent unity, in the Bible from beginning to end. And that unity focuses very much on the story of redemption, how God created a perfect creation, yet human beings rebelled against him and the whole rest of the Bible, from beginning to end, is really the story of God's reconciliation, God's redemption of his people, how he brings them back to himself. And so, every diverse part comes together into this great unifying story. Within that diversity then there are certain unifying themes, themes like the kingdom of God, themes like covenant, themes like redemption and God's reconciliation of himself to his people.

**Dr. Robert Lister**

The New Testament exhibits doctrinal unity with the Old Testament in the way that promises are fulfilled. So the promise of salvation for example is offered in a nutshell form in Genesis three, fifteen, where God in the midst of cursing the serpent, the man, and the woman, says that I will raise up a seed from the woman that will one day crush the head of the seed of the serpent. Serpent will strike his heel; the seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the serpent. The gospel is announced as early as Genesis 3:15 and yet Adam and Eve don't have the specificity of understanding that promise that comes even in Isaiah 53. And those who are recipients of Isaiah 53, do not understand that promise with the specificity that believers in the first century would have or even in our day as well and yet there is a continuity to that one promise. What comes in more specific form later is not an abrogation of what was given earlier; it's an expansion or a fulfillment. Theologians refer to this as the doctrine of progressive revelation. So the Scriptures or the promises get fleshed out, they become more clear and there is a continuity by way of increasing specificity and fulfillment of promises that were initially made.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

The unity of the Old and New Testament is a question that has vexed scholars over the years, but Christians have a conviction that God speaks with one message. The key to interpreting both the Old Testament and the New Testament is the coming of

Christ, so because of Christ's coming we can understand better all that was being pointed towards in the Old Testament, and that message has found fulfillment and shape in the coming of Christ. And, therefore, though it covers an enormous expanse of history and time and place, the Bible speaks with one voice because it has one author about the person of Christ.

### **Question 14:**

**How can Christians work toward the kind of doctrinal purity we find in the Apostles' Creed without sacrificing its level of doctrinal unity?**

**The Apostles' Creed reflects the early church's corporate belief in unity of the Bible's teachings. But in the modern church, it can sometimes be hard to get people to agree to these essential doctrines. How can Christians work toward the kind of doctrinal unity we find in the Apostles' Creed without sacrificing its level of doctrinal purity?**

#### **Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III**

The issue of the relationship between the pursuit of unity and the pursuit of truth is a very interesting and important question. I have come to be convicted myself over the last decade especially that in my younger days I was passionate about truth and wanted unity, but was ready to work for truth and let unity just naturally happen. And my conviction more and more is, unity does not just happen. Now, I need to back up and say there's a sense in which the Bible emphasizes — for instance the book of Ephesians — that it's God who creates our unity. There's a sense in which we don't create our unity; God has given us a unity that we sometimes fragment, and undermine, but he's the ultimate author of our unity, and so I don't want to take away from that at all. But at the human level, I think very often we assume that we can pursue the truth and that unity will just take care of itself. And I think that that's wrong. I think that it's a little bit like marriage. Marriage is not 50% on the part of the husband and 50% on the part of wife. It's 100% on the part of a husband and 100% on the part of a wife. And I think it's the same thing with God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Those who believe in the doctrines of grace and the sovereignty of God don't believe that it's 50% God and 50% man or 100% God and 0% man, we believe that it's 100% God and 100% man. And I think the truth/unity thing is very similar. I think we have to be 100% passionately committed to the truth and pursuing it, and I think we have to be 100% passionately committed to unity and pursuing it. And I think that means, one of the things that means at least is that the way that we pursue unity will never compromise the value of truth, and the way that we pursue truth will never compromise the value of unity. And I think typically, there are types of people in our world that fall off one of those ledges as they pursue truth and unity. They either decide that in order to have unity you must minimize the importance of truth, or that if you want to have truth, you really can't, in the end, be concerned for unity. And I don't think the Bible gives us that option. I think Jesus is very passionate about the unity of his followers, and I believe that Jesus is very passionate about the importance of truth for his followers and he doesn't ask us to choose between those.

So, I think part of the answer to the question of the relationship between the truth and unity is that we ought not seek a balance between those two at all, but that we ought to passionately pursue them both with all that we have and are.

Now, how do you do that? In practice, I would say that one way that we can pursue truth and unity together is to explore a gospel unity that we have with other believers that centers on a definite substance and content to the gospel. A lot of times people will talk about gospel unity but they don't want to define the gospel. I was talking to a president of a large evangelical institution just a few weeks ago who was at a meeting where all of the people said, we want to be unified on the gospel and he raised his hand and he said, well what do we mean by the gospel? And the response from several people in the room was we don't want to get into defining the gospel. Well, I don't think you can have gospel unity if you're not even willing to define the gospel. But having defined the gospel and having agreed on the common ground of the gospel, I think one way that we can pursue unity and truth is to say that we are so committed to that unity that we have in the gospel, that we are going to pursue unity with one another in life and ministry in such a way that we do not ask one another to relinquish our convictions of truth. But we in fact celebrate even those areas in which we differ from one another. We differ from one another respectfully. We differ from one another intelligently. We differ from one another lovingly. But we look for things in one another that we have mutual joy in at the truth and convictional level. And we celebrate those things to a certain extent, so that the unity is enjoyed and so that we can have legitimate, conscientious differences in other areas of our theological convictions. So I think that's one way you go about pursuing both unity and truth.

### **Dr. Stephen Blakemore**

Well, when it comes to the situation or the context of us thinking in the twenty-first century in the world in which we live about the purity of our doctrines but also what it means to be one in Christ, I think we discover that the creeds are a very good place for us to start. The creeds themselves articulate for us what is the very core, the heart of our faith. These creeds are an expression of what came out of the apostolic era and in the second century were known as the rule of faith. These creeds themselves were utilized as a way to identify those churches in the Mediterranean world, which were essentially a part of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, when we think about unity in Christ we have to realize that the thing that we have unity in is Christ and in the Triune God. Now, having said that, it's interesting to me that in the modern world the things that divide us most often are not doctrines about God so much as they are doctrines about how we relate to God or how we are saved by God. We argue over things like predestination, or if salvation can be lost, or who is a candidate for baptism. And the thing that strikes me is this, that in the midst of our disagreement we begin not with a disagreement about God, but we begin with a disagreement about salvation. It's telling to me in this sense, that perhaps what we are more concerned about is our salvation, rather than the nature of God, rather than the truth about God. What we are most obsessed with is ourselves. How can we be right with God? And while that is an absolutely natural and understandable interest that we have, it is not where we should start in our disagreements with one another. Disagreements over the

nature of salvation or over church polity or over what expression worship should take, those are all important things, but they're things that should only be discussed after we have come to realize whether or not we have a consensus among us about the nature of God as trinity, the nature of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Lord and Savior and the nature of the Holy Spirit as the one who comes to bring us regeneration and the new birth.

So, doctrinal purity really has to begin with God, not with a subsequent question about how we know God or how we are saved by God or how we should organize our life together as God's church. Instead our passion and our burning desire should be to be clear in our minds about who God is. That's where we can find much common ground and also where the dividing line will be between those who want to confess Jesus as a great example, but may not want to confess him as God incarnate. And all of those things are important when it comes to endeavoring to establish what it means to be able to be in conversation with someone about matters of faith and practice. So, starting with the creeds, starting with the nature of God, starting with the essence of the life of God and the nature of Jesus Christ — these are absolutely irreplaceable in the quest for Christian unity, but also irreplaceable in the quest for doctrinal purity.

**Dr. Dennis Johnson**

Well it is important, for Christians, for the church, to balance doctrinal purity along with our unity in Christ and the ways that we can do that I would say would be, among other things, to emphasize the unity that is ours in the gospel, in the key elements that are articulated in some of the classic confessions and creeds going all the way back to the time of the early church fathers. One of the great advantages of the creeds is that they really give us the distillation of those who have gone before us, and their thinking about what the Bible teaches in its core. And of course that's rooted in the message of the New Testament itself. You think about Matthew 16 when Jesus is meeting with his disciples, in Caesarea Philippi. First he quizzes them about what all the opinions are about who he is and then he says, "Now, who do you say that I am?" And of course Peter gets it right. He confesses that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God. And that confession sets followers of Christ, believers in Christ, sets the church apart from all the other complimentary opinions that are buzzing around about Jesus. And of course the apostle Paul in a doctoral passage, a doctoral epistle, that emphasizes unity above all, the letter to the Ephesians, emphasizes that our unity is based in the fact that we are founded on the foundation of the apostles and prophets as they have revealed, as they have received the revelation of the mystery of God in Christ. So it's crucial for us to see the confessions as articulating those core doctrines that unite us.

I think it's also important for us to recognize, and this also contributes to unity, that the great creeds and confessions don't attempt to say everything on which the Bible speaks. While we are united in our core faith and trust in Christ and in the triune God, we're all still in process and we don't all grow and the same pace and we don't all see all the details of Scripture in quite the same way. So again, the creeds and confessions in what they do not say call us to recognize that our unity is based in the core. And

while we may try and persuade one another on those other matters, we also don't let our differences on those other matters divide us or tempt us to exclude others who truly share with us in the core of the gospel. I think the church today is tempted to a couple of extremes, in some segments of the church, influenced by postmodernism, there's almost a question about whether anything is fixed or whether everything is up for grabs. The key doctrines — God is Creator and the distinction from the creation and the creatures, the deity of Christ and his humanity, the atonement — all of those things in some segments of the Western Church at least are being rethought, reexamined, doubted, questioned. There's also a temptation on the part of those who stand for Scripture to almost react in an opposite direction and emphasize that we need to agree on absolutely every detail at every point. And again, the importance is to emphasize the core of the gospel as it's articulated clearly in the New Testament and then summarized in the classic creeds and confessions and in our reformational confessions as well.

**Since the second century, the Apostles' Creed has helped unify Christians in countless churches and denominations throughout the world. It affirms many beliefs that we all hold in common, including our beliefs about God; the gospel story of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension; and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In every place and age, the Apostles' Creed helps Christians express our most fundamental beliefs together. It helps us hold firmly to the core of our faith, and promotes our unity as the body of Christ.**

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**Dr. Stephen Blakemore** is the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wesley Biblical Seminary.

**Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III** is the senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi and the John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson Campus.

**Dr. Dennis Johnson** is Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

**Dr. Keith Johnson** serves as the Director of Theological Education for the U.S campus ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ and is a guest professor of Systematic Theology for Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Peter Kuzmič** is the Eva B. and Paul E. Toms Distinguished Professor of World Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the co-founder and director of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia.

**Dr. Samuel Ling** is an historian, theologian, and missiologist devoted to exploring significant issues affecting the Chinese church and China ministries.

**Dr. Robert Lister** is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at the Talbot School of Theology.

**Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.** serves as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the flagship school of the Southern Baptist Convention.

**Dr. John Oswalt** is the Visiting Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

**Dr. J. I. Packer** is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and preaches and lectures widely in Great Britain and America.

**Dr. Jonathan Pennington** is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Robert Plummer** is the Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Dr. Mark Strauss** taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes** is Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University, and is a frequent guest speaker at churches, conferences, and retreats, in addition to co-pastoring a local church.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.

**Dr. Peter Walker** is Tutor in Biblical Theology at Wycliffe Hall and lectures in New Testament studies and Biblical Theology.