

Department of
Hermeneutics and Apologetics

CREDO

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Creeds have not only aided but also plagued the church throughout her history. As problems arose men gathered in councils to decide what were often important issues. The results of their deliberations took the form of creeds, and have come down to us today in what are known as the Apostles' Creed, Athanasian Creed, Westminster Confession, etc. Each was the outgrowth of a period of decision in the church, and met an impelling need of the time.

Today the church, and we speak of all Christendom, finds herself in a time of crisis. The need of our time is a true discernment of Christian essentials. Organized Christianity has become lost in a maze of non-essentials. These trappings must be stripped off in order that we may have a clear-cut message to give to a needy world. We need a creed of the essentials of our faith. Some have asserted, "The Bible is our creed," implying that this is a sufficient answer. Without question a belief in the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures is basic and essential, but it does not answer the question which we raise.

When you have the opportunity to deal with a new Christian, about which of the many "things of the Lord" would you first talk to him? Or if you are a Sunday School teacher or a pastor assuming a new responsibility, what truth would you first present to those waiting hearts? In other words, what should be emphasized first in our ministry? One assumes, of course, that the gospel must be presented first, for it alone is the power of God unto salvation. But the question is, What teaching should follow? Our churches are filled

with undernourished Christians. Can we find a formula for these babes in Christ?

If we could find in the Scriptures the account of one of God's servants who after preaching the gospel in power spent only a short time with the new converts, and if we could discover what general lines of truth he taught them, we should feel that this would be a divine answer to the question, yea, a divine creed for dealing with young believers.

Indeed, we have such a situation in the early history of the church. The Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey visited the city of Thessalonica and according to the record in the book of Acts was there only three or four weeks (Acts 17:2). Although Paul did not know when he entered the city how long he would be allowed to remain, we may believe that the Holy Spirit guided him to teach the new converts those things which would be essential to their faith. Thus we may discover from a study of the first epistle to the Thessalonians, written shortly after his visit there, guiding principles for our ministry today. In studying the book it is not only clear what Paul taught them, but it also seems clear that his ministry there may be summed up in these words from his own pen: ". . . how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven . . ." (1 Thess. 1:9, 10).

This we might call the Thessalonian creed, not that it should become a meaningless form to be repeated at stated intervals, but that its truths, presenting the essentials of our faith, should be emphasized today. Paul taught them, first of all

SEPARATION

This is the past tense of the creed and is expressed in the words "ye turned to God from idols." In a heathen setting these words are full of meaning. What had happened to cause this change in these heathen people? First, the apostle had taken the message to them. Even in spite of the persecution which he endured at Philippi, he had been bold to preach to

those at Thessalonica. This boldness (2:2) brought with it persecution, and such we may expect today as we draw near the end of the age. But persecution does not deter the servant of the Lord because his purpose is to speak the gospel of God. Heathen religions have no good news to offer their followers, but Christianity is the good news that God has provided salvation in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Consequently our boldness, like that of Paul, is not ill-founded, for it is in the Person of the Lord Jesus.

How often one has seen witnesses of various sects offensively proclaiming their doctrines and generally making a nuisance of themselves. This has sometimes caused Christians to go to the opposite extreme of complete silence. This need not be the case, for God's messenger who has holy boldness will find himself, as Paul, approved of God (2:4). The message has been committed to us as a trust, and this trust must be faithfully discharged. This certainly does not mean that men will always be pleased, but that is not our purpose. However, we do need to be gentle even as Paul was (2:7), and to possess pure motives, all of which is dependent upon absolute willingness to commit all to the service of the Lord (2:8).

When the message is faithfully proclaimed, God honors His Word and saves men and women. So it was at Thessalonica. The message did not fall upon deaf ears, but came in power (1:5). This was proved by the changed lives which followed reception of the gospel. Having turned wholeheartedly to the Lord, these believers had completely turned their backs on the idols which they formerly worshipped. Reception of God's good news brings separation from former things. But, as is often the case, there followed persecution and suffering. From the very day of their conversion the Thessalonian believers experienced affliction (1:6). This Paul taught them they should expect (3:3), for as they took a separated stand they might expect to be the objects of Satan's designs (3:5). Especially as young believers would

their faith be threatened, and it was for this very reason that he longed to see them in order to build them up in the faith (3:10). These things, then, may be the experience of one who turns to God from idols. Notice how closely these two things are linked. One cannot turn to God without turning from idols. Seeing so many who profess to have turned to God who give no evidence of separation from the idols of our day only underscores what has been said concerning the need for preaching and teaching this essential of our faith. Salvation and separation should go hand-in-hand, not because of any legal requirement, but because of intense love and gratitude to the One who bore all our sin. Closely related to and based upon this, Paul also taught these young believers concerning

SERVICE

This is the present aspect of the creed—"to serve the living and true God." There are two words used in the Greek New Testament for service, but the word used here is the one which has the significance of serving as a slave. The figure is not one of forced labor but of a voluntary labor of love. The Old Testament illustrates this word for us in Deuteronomy 15:16, 17: "And it shall be, if he say unto thee, I will not go away from thee; because he loveth thee and thine house, because he is well with thee; then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant forever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise."

Thus it was in the case of these believers at Thessalonica. Because of their love, they wanted to serve the living and true God, and so they voluntarily took the position of bond-slaves. And just as the Hebrew slave bore a mark in his ear, these believers doubtless bore marks of their persecution (cf. Gal. 6:17).

But, one may ask, if service is not a legal requirement, can there be any standard? There is a standard and it is the highest one possible—"that ye would walk worthy of God,

who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory" (2:12). What this means in everyday living is explained in the first twelve verses of chapter four, where Paul tells us how to please God. He exhorts the one who would serve God to abound in sanctification, love, and ambition. These things Paul taught during his brief stay in the city, for his exhortation is not to learn a new thing, but to abound in that which was already known. Sanctification must be from the world and from all the heathen and licentious practices which the heathen neighbors practiced (4:3-6). Sanctification is also unto God whose standard is His own holiness, but who also enables us to live up to that standard by His Holy Spirit (4:7, 8). Love, too, is a necessary characteristic of the servant of God, and this love which is so needed today should ever be on the increase (4:9, 10). But there seemed to be a tendency toward a lack of ambition in this early church, and so Paul exhorts them to be ambitious, to be quiet, to do their own business, and to work (4:11, 12). How God needs today men and women who will serve Him in business, in the professions, or in whatever God-honoring trade they may be engaged. Paul has set the example by serving as a tent-maker.

Finally, the apostle describes the sphere of service. It is Godward, for it is our primary aim to please Him (4:1). But it is also manward, which is a natural consequence of the first (4:12). One who is walking so as to please God will be walking honestly toward those who are without Christ. Paul was a model servant. May we imitate him, for he imitated Christ.

It is only natural that the servant should look forward to the completion of his service and to that time when he shall see his Lord, and so it is not surprising that we find Paul teaching these young converts concerning the

SECOND COMING

The Lord Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach believers concerning things to come (Jn. 16:13), and

Paul includes this future aspect of our faith in the essential teachings of Christianity. Concerning the future, it seems that the Thessalonians knew two things predominantly. They knew, in the first place, that they were waiting for a Person (1:10). Their attitude of waiting was one of eager expectancy. The word used in this verse is a compound of the verb "wait" and the preposition "up." Thus we get the picture of these believers being taught to wait up for their beloved Savior. What a contrast to the teaching concerning the second coming in many quarters today, and yet how essential it is that believers be in the attitude of waiting up for the Lord Jesus. This is a purifying hope (1 Jn. 3:3), and it seems reasonable to believe that the church today has lost her purity because she has lost her hope of the soon coming of the Lord. This is an essential which has been relegated to a place of unimportance. Just how much these believers knew concerning the rapture of the church is not clear, but they evidently did not clearly understand what became of believers who had died, for this is the question Paul answers in the latter part of chapter four. This passage does not necessarily imply, however, that they had been taught nothing concerning the rapture of the church, for they were waiting for Him (1:10).

In addition, there was a second aspect to their hope for the future, and that was in the kingdom which was to come. This is implied in their question concerning the dead. Whether or not believers who died before the Lord's coming would share in the kingdom was troubling them, and Paul answers the question by saying that God will bring them *with* Him. Obviously, if the dead are to come with Christ, they will have to be raised prior to that event. But there is also direct evidence that Paul taught them concerning the kingdom. He says: "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For ye yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (5:1, 2).

This is also confirmed by the second epistle (2:5). It is

very likely that these people were acquainted with such passages as Isaiah 2:10-22; 13:6-13; Joel 1:15 in which the day of the Lord is depicted; but the apostle taught them *how* that day should come, that is, as a thief in the night. It will be a time of terrible judgment, but those who are in Christ are in the ark of safety.

These are the things which the Spirit of God considered essential for these new converts to know during the short time the apostle Paul was with them. This is the creed, not which *they* composed and recited as a matter of form, but which *their enemies* and the enemies of Christ testified of them. They were saying of these Christians, "They have turned from our idols; they are serving as slaves this God; and they are looking for His Son to come back to earth."

Has God changed or is His power waning? Then why does not the world testify these same things of the church of Christ today? Is it because we have misplaced the emphasis and neglected to teach these essentials of our faith?

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