

CHAPTER 9

Creeds And Councils

What is a CREED? The word **CREED** comes from the Latin word **credo** which means "I believe." Hence a CREED is a statement of belief or a statement of faith. A CREED is a written statement of what a person or a church or a group of churches believes.

What is your CREED? What do you believe? What do you believe about God and Christ and salvation and sin? What do you believe about where you have come from and why you are here and where you are going? Can you put your CREED into writing? Can you write down your basic beliefs in the space provided? Give it a try:

I BELIEVE (finish the rest)

One of the oldest creeds is called *The Apostles' Creed*. There are many churches that recite this creed every Sunday as part of their worship service. The early church adopted the Apostles' Creed in order that everybody might know what the Church believed to be true Christian teaching, in distinction from the false and erroneous teaching that were then being spread (by groups such as the Gnostics and Montanists). The Apostles' Creed sounds like this:

**I believe in God almighty
And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried
And the third day rose from the dead**

**Who ascended into heaven
And sits on the right hand of the Father
Whence he comes to judge the living and the dead,**

**And (I believe) in the Holy Ghost
The holy church
The remission (forgiveness) of sins
The resurrection of the flesh
The life everlasting.**

Note: This is a more modern version of the Apostles' Creed. Go to the end of this chapter for the older and more familiar version.

Do you believe the things that are mentioned in this creed? Would you say that this creed contains truth or error? _____ Do you believe this creed because it agrees with the Bible or do you believe the Bible because it agrees with the Apostles' Creed? What should be our authority as to what we should believe and what we should not believe? Should our authority be God's Word or man's creed? _____

A creed is no good unless it is BASED ON TRUTH. People may strongly believe certain things that are absolutely false. As an imaginary example, suppose a person said...

**"I BELIEVE THE WORLD IS FLAT
THE MOON IS MADE OUT OF CHEESE
AND A NUCLEAR WAR IS GOING TO DESTROY EVERY
PERSON FROM OFF THE FACE OF THIS FLAT WORLD!"**

This is a CREED, but it is a useless creed because it is not based on truth and reality.

The Seven Great Church Councils

A COUNCIL is a meeting of church leaders where important questions are discussed, advice is given and decisions are made. The first council ever held was in Jerusalem and is described in Acts chapter 15. Who were some of the leaders of the church that were present at this council (Acts 15:2,6,7,12,13)?

What was the problem that made it necessary to have this council (Acts 15:1-2)?

What decision was made (Acts 15:11,19-29)?

As we study the subsequent history of the church we learn about seven great church councils. These are sometimes called the seven great ECUMENICAL councils which means they were held on behalf on the whole Christian world.

Why did the church leaders (usually called "BISHOPS") come together for these councils? It usually happened this way: Certain teachings, usually false teachings, would be spread among the churches. Concerned church leaders would then see a need to meet together to decide what the true teaching of the church really was. The council would be held, the false teachings would

be condemned and a statement of belief or a CREED would be written to show what the true teaching of the church really was.

The seven great church councils are as follows:

1. **The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.)**
(To settle the Arian dispute)
2. **The Council of Constantinople (381. A.D.)**
(To assert the personality of the Holy Spirit and the humanity of Christ)
3. **The Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.)**
(To emphasize the unity of Christ's personality and to condemn the views of Pelagius)
4. **The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)**
(To state the relationship between the two natures of Christ)
5. **The Council of Constantinople (553 A.D.)**
(To deal with the Monophysite dispute)
6. **The Council of Constantinople (680 A.D.)**
(To condemn the Monothelites)
7. **The Council of Nicea (787 A.D.)**
(To deal with problems raised by the image controversy and to decide that the worship of images should be allowed)

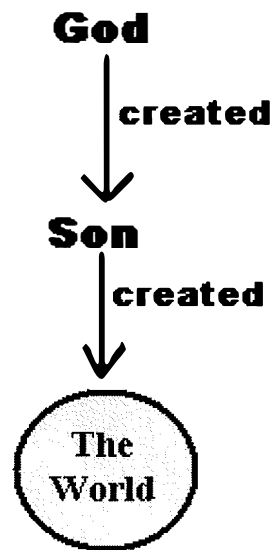
The first four of these councils dealt with some very important issues relating to the Person of Jesus Christ, and it is to these that we will be giving our attention. In this chapter we will not say much about the last three.

The Council of Nicea

This first of the seven great church councils was called by emperor Constantine who wanted to see Christians united. Nicea was located near the city of Constantinople. There was a doctrinal battle going on throughout the empire. The issue was a very important one: **WAS JESUS CHRIST GOD OR WAS HE NOT GOD?** This question needed to be answered.

The man responsible for the false teaching was a very popular preacher named ARIUS. He was an elder (leader) of the Alexandrian church in Egypt. Many followed the teachings of Arius and his false doctrines spread to many places. What did this man teach? What was his error?

Arius taught that the Son (Jesus Christ) was a CREATED BEING (a CREATURE!). He taught that there was a time when Christ did not exist. Then long ago God created Christ (the Son) and He became the highest and greatest of created beings. God then gave the Son power to create everything else, including angels, the universe, people and animals:



(He believed that only the Father was God.)

(He taught that Christ was a creature and was not fully God.)

(He made Christ to be a mere creature and taught that God created all things through Jesus Christ.)

Arius was concerned about the heathen who might think Christians worshipped two gods (the Father and the Son). He was concerned about the danger of polytheism (the worship of more than one God). Do Christians worship God the Father? _____ Do Christians worship Jesus Christ (Rev. 5:12)? _____ DO CHRISTIANS WORSHIP TWO GODS? _____ Why not?

The real issue was this: WAS CHRIST, THE SON, AS TRULY AND FULLY GOD AS THE FATHER? Arius said, "NO!" Was Christ a mere creature? Arius said, "YES!"

The teachings of Arius are very similar to the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses today. The Jehovah's Witnesses also deny the **deity** of Christ (that Christ is truly and fully **God**). They too teach that there was a time when the Son did not exist. They too teach that God created the Son and that God created everything else through the Son. They too teach that Christ is a mere creature (they say He is a great angel). Were the Arians of yesterday correct in their teachings? Are the Jehovah's Witnesses of today correct in their doctrine of Christ?

What does the Bible teach? Can you find any verses which clearly teach that Jesus Christ is GOD? (if you have trouble, look in John chapter 1, chapter 5, chapter 10 and 1 John chapter 5)

Arius was a man who lived a very pure life. Morally he was blameless and those who knew him well had nothing to say against him. And yet this man taught a very dangerous and deadly error. We should learn a lesson from this. DON'T ASSUME THAT A MAN'S TEACHINGS ARE CORRECT JUST BECAUSE HIS LIFE **SEEMS** TO BE CORRECT. Satan is an "angel of _____" (2 Con. 11:14) and often Satan's servants appear to be "ministers of _____" (2 Cor. 11:15). Don't be fooled by this. You might meet a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon who does not smoke or drink or swear and who seems to live a morally upright life. Purity of life and purity of doctrine must go together. The doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons is corrupt and poisonous.

The opposite problem is when people hold to correct and pure doctrine (they believe that Christ is God, etc.) but their lives are very impure. They believe right but they do not behave right. We will talk about this problem later.

Among the Christian churches of the fourth century A.D. a great battle was taking place. It was a DOCTRINAL CIVIL WAR. Those who believed that Christ was God battled against the followers of Arius. The great opponent of Arius was a champion of the faith by the name of ATHANASIUS.

For most of his adult life Athanasius fought steadfastly and unrelentingly against the Arian false teaching. He became the great defender of the deity of Christ. He believed with all of his heart that man's salvation depended on this truth. Could Christ save man if He were **less than God**? Athanasius believed this was impossible. He said, "Jesus, whom I know as my Redeemer, cannot be less than God."

Athanasius bravely defended the true faith and he paid a price for this. Five times he was banished from his home city of Alexandria. He spent a total of 20 years in exile. His great "crime" was that he firmly and uncompromisingly believed that Jesus Christ was God. The passion of his life was to defend and vindicate the doctrine of the deity of Christ. As a result he is today known as "THE FATHER OF ORTHODOXY."

The word "ORTHODOX" comes from a Greek word ("**ORTHOS**") which means "straight, right, correct, true." The straight and correct doctrine of Christ is that Jesus is truly and fully God. Arius taught a "crooked" and false doctrine about who Christ really was. He veered away from the straight path of truth and ended up on the path of error.

The Council of Nicea was called by Constantine to settle this issue of whether Christ was God. There were 318 bishops (church leaders) in attendance. Some of these men still had scars from the tortures they had undergone during the severe Roman persecutions (before the days of Constantine). This council made the right decision. The party of Athanasius was victorious and the views of Arius were condemned.

This council wrote a CREED (statement of faith) which was the first official declaration of the deity of Christ. The first part of this Creed of Nicea went like this:

We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible;

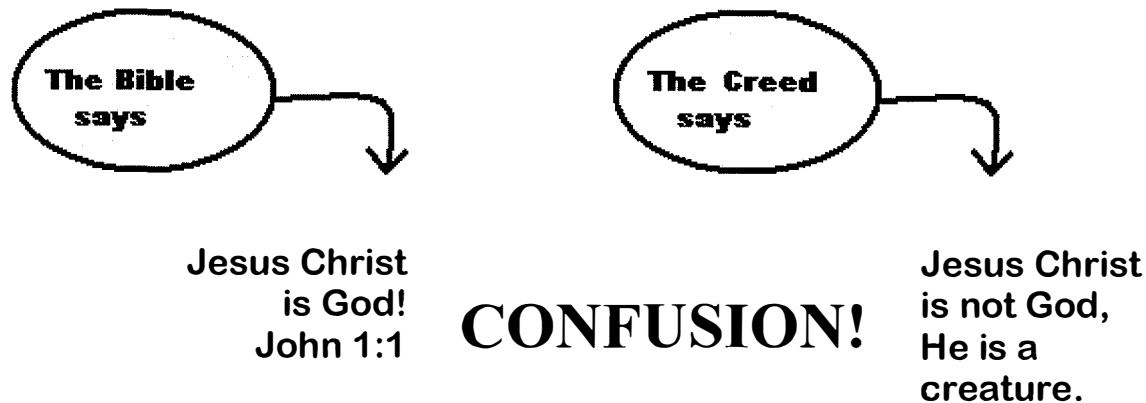
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God...Very God from Very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made...who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate...

This CREED also put a curse upon those who say that there was a time when Christ did not exist or upon those who deny that Christ is God.

The decision of this council did not solve all the problems. The false doctrines of Arius continued to be taught and spread years after this council met. Even the sons of Constantine believed these false teachings. Even today Jehovah's Witnesses continue to teach the doctrines of Arius.

The Council of Nicea made the right decision. If this council had made the wrong decision and voted in favor of Arius, this would have been disastrous for the churches. This would have

caused utter confusion because the CREED of the churches would have taught one thing and the BIBLE of the churches would have taught something completely different!



If our creeds are not based on TRUTH, then they are worthless and will cause nothing but harm.

For an excellent detailed study of our Lord's deity, see our paper, [The Deity of Christ](#).

The Council of Constantinople

This second great council met in 381 A.D. This time the problem was false teaching concerning the HUMANITY of Jesus Christ. A man by the name of Apollinarius denied the full humanity of Christ which means that he denied His complete manhood. Apollinarius did not deny the deity of Christ, but in his zeal to maintain the true deity of Christ, he fell into the error of denying Christ's full humanity.

This shows us the need to be BALANCED. Does the Bible teach that Jesus is God (John 1:1; 1 John 5:20)? Does the Bible teach the fact that Jesus is also MAN (1 Timothy 2:5 and compare John 1:14)? _____ To be balanced we must hold firmly to BOTH of these truths, even though our little minds cannot fully understand the deep mysteries of the GOD-MAN.

The Council of Constantinople condemned the teaching of Apollinarius. It also made an important statement concerning the HOLY SPIRIT. It stated that the Holy Spirit was equal with the Father and Son. This was the first clear statement on the TRINITY (one God in three Persons: *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*). The council made it very clear that the Holy Spirit was GOD also (compare Acts 5:3-4).

The Council of Ephesus

This third council met in 431 A.D. This council condemned the teachings of a man named Nestorius. This man taught that Christ was TWO SEPARATE PERSONS, a divine person and a human person, JOINED TOGETHER IN A MECHANICAL WAY, in Siamese twin fashion. This is another false view of Christ. It is true that Christ has TWO NATURES—a divine nature

and a human nature—yet He is only ONE PERSON. He is the GOD-MAN. His two natures are perfectly blended together into one Person.

All of these early controversies show us how very important it is to understand Jesus Christ and WHO HE IS. Who is the only Person who can really give us understanding of the Person of Christ (see Matthew 11:27 and 16:16-17)? _____

The Council of Ephesus also condemned the teachings of a man named Pelagius. This man held to false ideas concerning SIN and SALVATION. This is what he taught:

He denied that the human race had fallen in Adam.

He taught that Adam's sin did not descend on the whole human race.

He believed that man was not born corrupt.

He taught that babies are innocent, and then they become bad when they grow up, through the bad example of others.

He believed that salvation could come by good works and that man does not really need to be born again, just improved.

He also taught that each soul is a separate creation of God and, therefore, uncontaminated by the sin of Adam.

Can you show from the Bible that these ideas are false? What are some verses you might use (if you have trouble, see Romans chapter 5 and Ephesians chapter 2)?

_____ Do you think there are people today who believe some of these views? Pelagius' main opponent was AUGUSTINE, one of the greatest of the Church fathers. Augustine taught the true doctrine of the Bible that EVERY MAN IS CONCEIVED AND BORN IN SIN AND CAN BE SAVED ONLY THROUGH THE GRACE OF GOD. Is this what you believe? Have you been saved by the grace of God?

The Council of Chalcedon

This fourth great council met in 451 A.D. with 600 bishops present. Again the problem revolved around the PERSON of Christ. A man by the name of Eutyches taught that after the incarnation the human and divine natures of Christ were fused into one nature, the divine. In other words, he believed that the human nature of Christ was absorbed into the divine nature (which means that the human nature of Christ was somehow "deified" and made divine).

Eutyches, in teaching these things, denied the true humanity of Christ. Out of this council came one of the clearest statements ever written on the PERSON of Christ. These church leaders had enough wisdom to know that Christ, as seen in the gospels, was truly HUMAN in the highest sense of the word. He was born, grew, hungered, thirsted, slept, wept, suffered and died. Even the Gospel of John, which presents Jesus as GOD, the divine Son, makes it very clear that Jesus was also a man. How do the following verses show that Jesus was really a man?

John 2:3 _____

John 4:6 _____

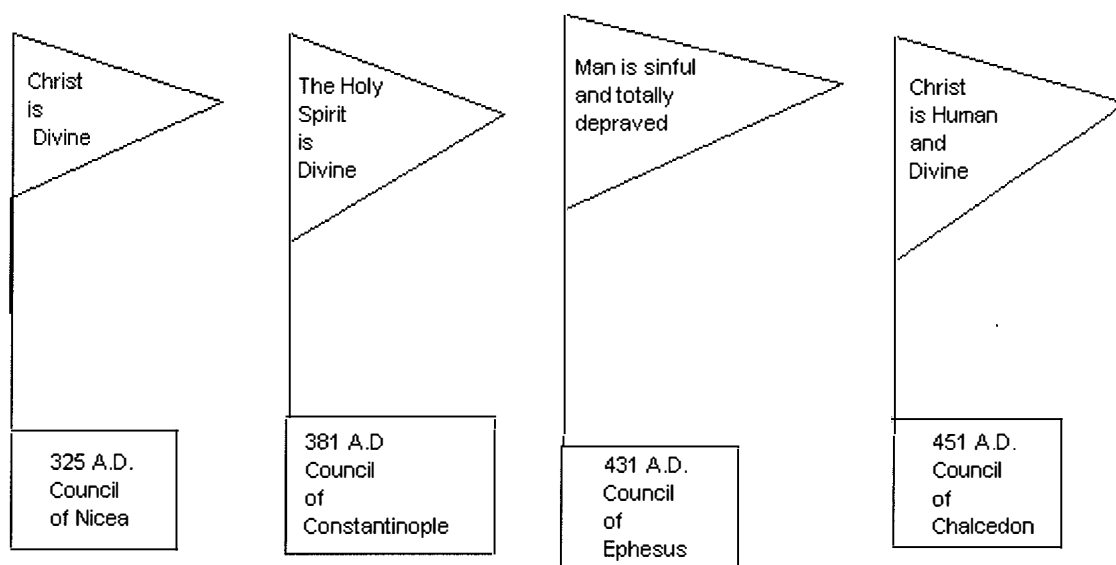
John 4:7 (and 19:28) _____

John 11:35 _____

John 19:30,33 _____

In the CREED that came forth from the Council of Chalcedon the Church reasserted its belief in the full and complete deity of Christ, but it also confessed its belief in His equally full and complete humanity. Furthermore the Church confessed the existence of two natures in Christ: the human and the divine. These two natures exist in Christ "without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation." Finally, the Church confessed that while Christ has two natures, He is one Person, not two persons.

The last three of the seven church councils were not as important and will not be discussed in this chapter. To review the first four church councils, look at the following chart. In a simple way this chart will remind you of the first four councils we have already studied and the important decisions that these councils made.



Adapted from B. K. Kuiper, *THE CHURCH IN HISTORY*, p.33.

Problems with Creeds

Sometimes creeds can **hurt** more than they **help**. Sometimes they **BIND** people instead of **SETTING THEM FREE**. Instead of being a **BLESSING** creeds can become a **CURSE**. Let's think about some of these problems:

1. A CREED CAN SET FORTH FALSE DOCTRINE.

The Council of Trent is an example of this. This Catholic Council met in the mid 1500's (from 1545 to 1563). This is a good example of a council approving **FALSE DOCTRINE** (doctrine that does not agree with the teaching of God's Word). Here are some of the false doctrines which came forth from this council:

1. This council upheld the doctrine of transubstantiation, which is the Catholic MASS. (They believe that the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus and that He is being sacrificed every time the mass is observed.)
2. This council made it clear that it believed in justification by faith AND WORKS (rather than by faith in Christ alone).
3. This council reaffirmed the existence of PURGATORY. Heaven and hell is clearly taught in the Bible, but where in the Bible is purgatory mentioned?
4. This council added certain books to our Bible (known as the Apocrypha) such as the books of Maccabees, Baruch, Sirach, etc.

The Roman Catholic church still believes these doctrines even to this day. Does the Bible teach these things?

2. A CREED CAN BECOME AN EQUAL OR GREATER AUTHORITY THAN THE BIBLE.

People can become very fond of their creeds, even to the point where their creeds become more important than the Bible. Instead of saying, "THUS SAITH THE LORD!" they say "THUS SAITH MY CREED!" This is very dangerous. The Bible must always and ever be our FINAL AUTHORITY for what we believe and teach and for how we live. Creeds may be helpful, but we must always go BACK TO THE BIBLE, not back to our creeds.

3. CREEDS CAN CAUSE PEOPLE TO MISUSE THE SCRIPTURES.

People often appeal to Scripture to confirm their creed rather than to decide it. Some people would change their Bible to make it fit their creed rather than change their creed to make it fit their Bible. For example, a person may have said, "MY CREED IS THAT JESUS CHRIST WAS NOT GOD. GOD CREATED HIM. NOW I WILL GO TO THE BIBLE AND FIND VERSES THAT WILL PROVE THAT MY CREED IS CORRECT!" Is this the right way to use the Bible? Remember, people can use (misuse) the Bible to prove almost anything! A person might wrongly use 1 Corinthians 10:23 to prove that it is lawful to rob a bank. Is this a correct use of the Bible?

4. CREEDS OFTEN USE COMPLICATED LANGUAGE.

The great creeds often use complicated, technical language. For example, the creed of Chalcedon, in talking about the two natures of Christ, says this: "the distinction of natures being in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature being preserved, and coming together to form one person and one entity." Do you find this statement easy to understand?

How different the Bible is! The Bible can present the most difficult ideas in the most simple words. For example, see JOHN 1:1-3. If we go back to the CREEDS we will get confused. If we go back to the Bible, we will receive much help. Man always tends to complicate things. God is the greatest of all Teachers, and He knows how to simplify things.

5. THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE CREEDS AND WHO ARE CALLED "ORTHODOX" MAY NOT BE CORRECT AT ALL!

It is not enough just to believe some creeds, even if they are good creeds. The Roman Catholic Church believes in all of the creeds of the first four Church Councils. The Roman Catholic Church believes that Christ is God, etc. But this church also teaches many things about salvation and heaven and hell that are very false. They may be ORTHODOX and straight on some things, but they are very crooked and wrong on others. We must believe ALL OF WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES, not just some of it.

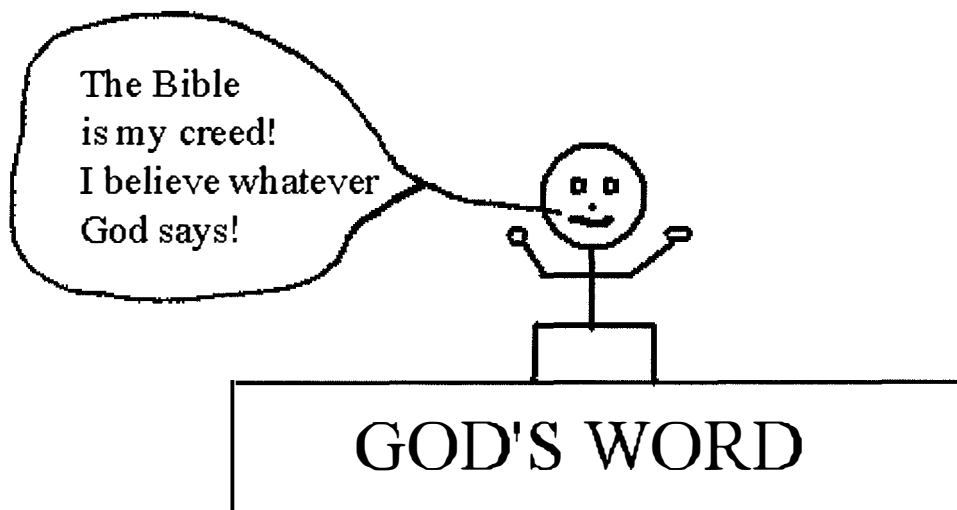
6. SOME HAVE THE RIGHT CREED BUT THE WRONG CONDUCT.

Some seem to **believe** right but they do not **behave** right. We find this in James chapter 2. These Jews believed the CREED that there is ONE _____ (James 2:19), but how did they live (James 2:14-17)? _____

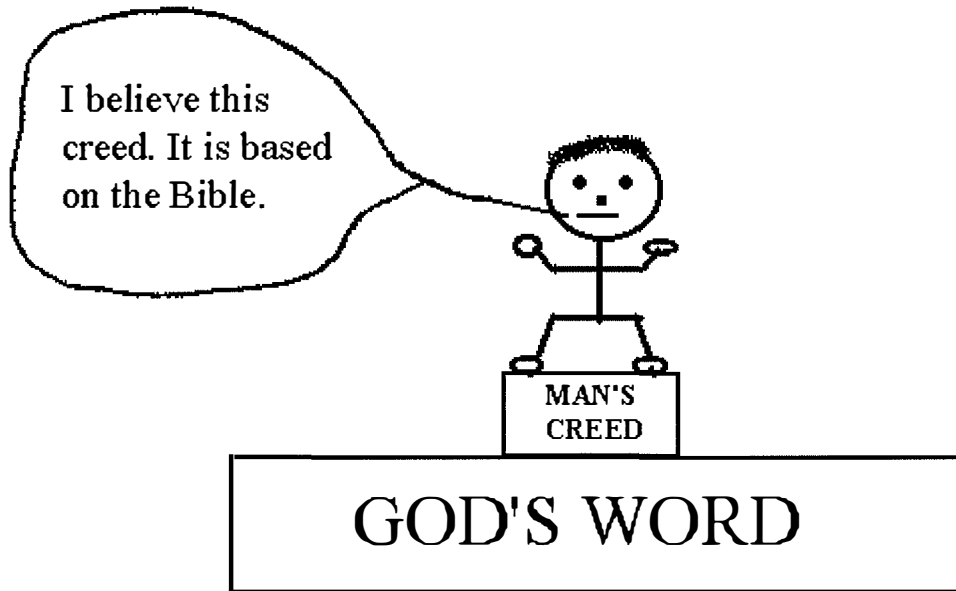
If we believe right we should also live right (behave right!). The best creed in the world is no good if we do not put its truths into action in our lives. If we fail to do this we will have nothing but a DEAD ORTHODOXY. We have a right creed, but there is no LIFE because we refuse to live out that which we believe. If we really believe something it ought to change our lives. Athanasius not only believed in the deity of Christ, but HE LIVED IT and he suffered for it.

7. CREEDS CAN EASILY BECOME SEPARATED FROM THE BIBLE.

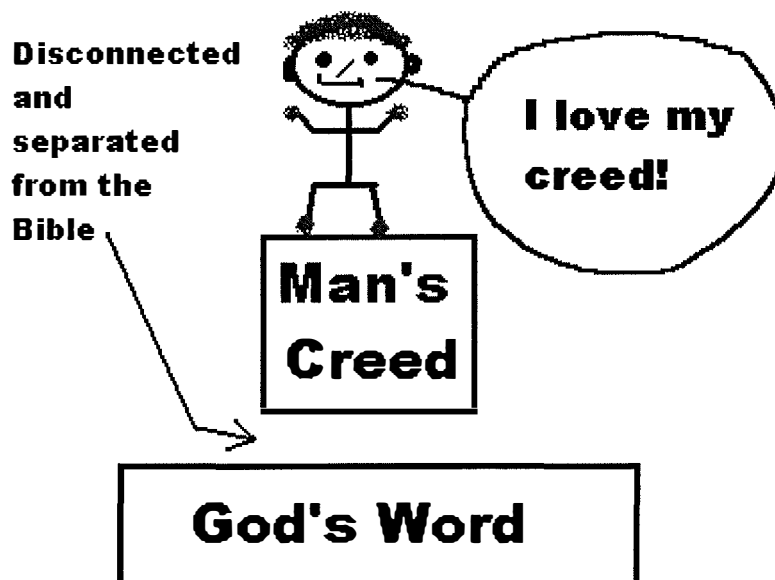
Where is the safest place to stand? The following illustrations might help.



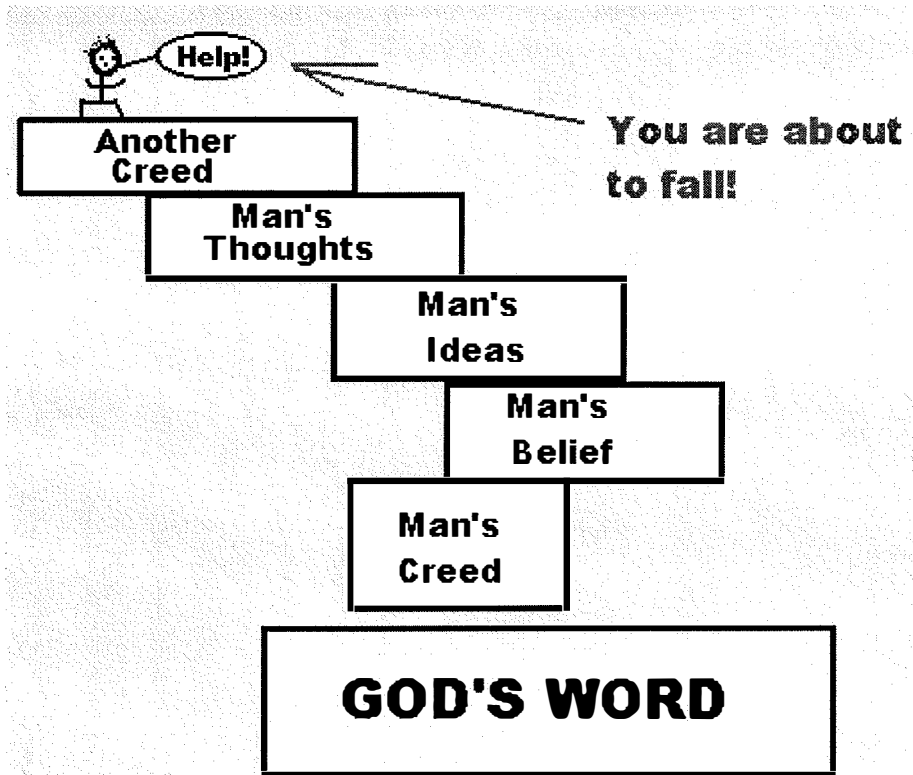
This man is standing on safe ground, on a solid foundation. God's people should never budge from such a place. We should be steadfast and unmovable.



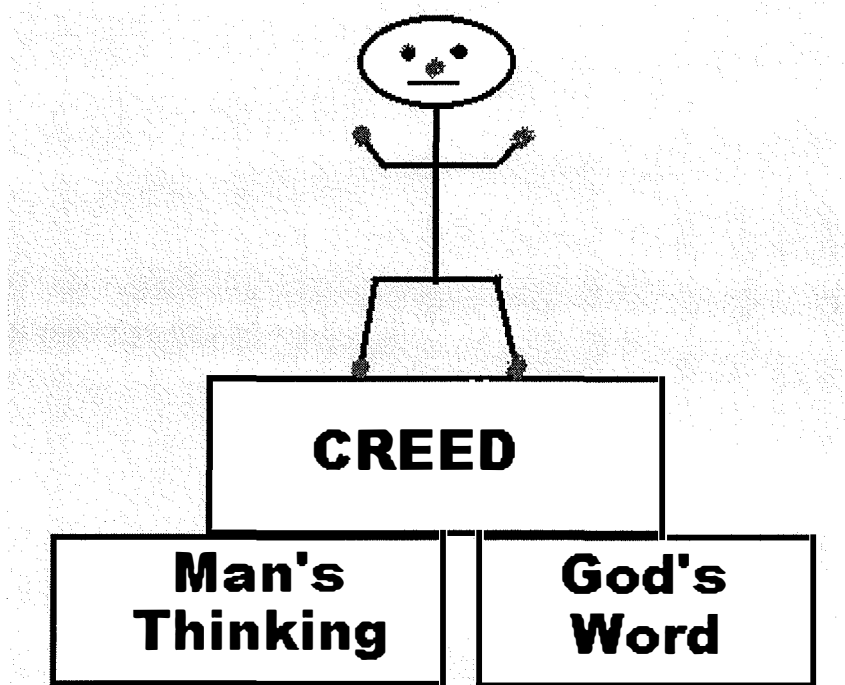
Notice how this man has taken one step away from God's Word. The creed is based on God's Word, which is good, but the man is now standing on the creed. He is only indirectly standing on God's Word. A creed should never replace the Bible.



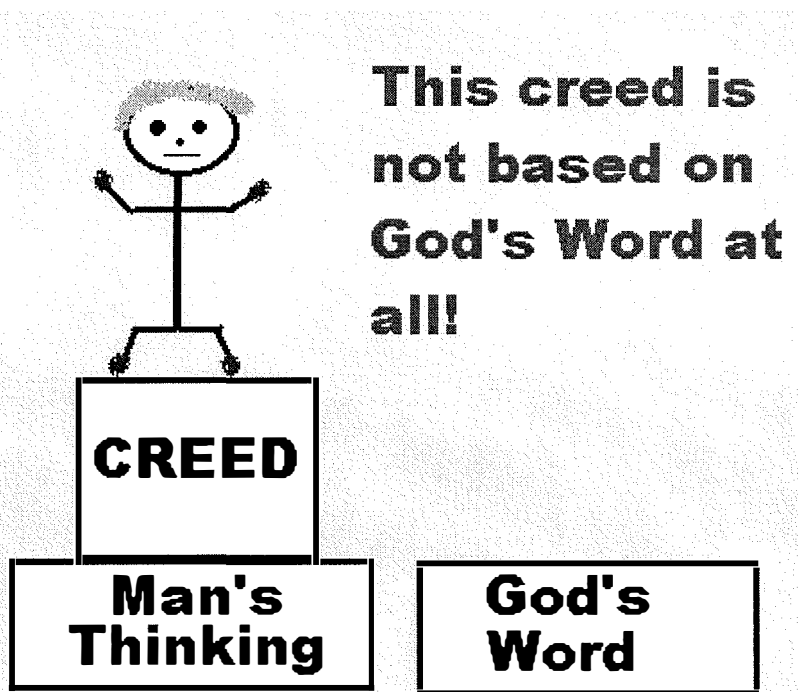
Notice how man's creed is no longer resting squarely on God's Word. It is disconnected even though it is still located close to God's Word. But once the creed is separated from the Bible, it can begin to drift away.



Notice how man gets farther and farther away from God's Word, all because of his reliance upon his own thoughts and ideas which are divorced from God's Word.



This creed is a dangerous MIXTURE of God's truth and man's ideas. We always pollute and corrupt God's truth whenever we mix man's ideas with it.



What about you? Is the BIBLE your creed or are you standing on the shaky ideas and opinions of men? How important is the Bible to you? How important is the Bible to you when it comes to what you believe and how you live? How solid is the foundation under your feet? See Matthew 7:24-27. Are you the FOOLISH MAN mentioned in these verses or the WISE MAN? Does your

life agree with your creed or does your life seem to contradict what you say you believe?

8. WATCH OUT FOR MODERN CREEDS.

Before reading this chapter of notes you may not have known anything about these ancient creeds. Don't feel too bad about this. Most people, including religious, church going people, know very little about these ancient church creeds. But what about modern day creeds? You can be sure that man is always making new creeds. Sometimes these are private creeds ("This is what I believe") and sometimes they are public creeds ("This is what WE believe," "This is what our group believes," "This is what most scientists believe," etc.). You will hear new creeds all the time, whether they be long or short.

Be on the lookout! BEWARE of today's creeds! WATCH for them! WEIGH them carefully! Don't WORRY over them because man's beliefs are not the basis of God's truth. Man's creeds come and go, but "the word of our _____ shall stand _____" (Isaiah 40:8). A person's belief makes a CREED, but a person's belief does not make TRUTH.

We hear many CREEDS (statements of belief) today. Here are but a few examples: "The Bible is not true." "I believe man has descended from apes." "Jesus Christ was the best man who ever lived but He was not God." "The world will be destroyed by nuclear weapons." etc. (Can you think of more?) Unbelief always departs from the truth and ends up in error.

Thank God for the Bible. Stay in the Bible. Forget the creeds because it is what God says that counts. Let your doctrinal statement (statement of faith) be this: THUS SAITH THE LORD! Make sure the Word of God is the solid foundation under your feet!

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The Apostles' Creed was discussed earlier in this lesson. Here is the older and more familiar version:

I believe in GOD THE FATHER Almighty, [Maker of heaven and earth] and in JESUS CHRIST, his only begotten Son, our Lord; who was [conceived] by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; [suffered] under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, [dead] and buried. [He descended into Hades]; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father [Almighty]; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

[I believe] in the HOLY GHOST; the holy [catholic] church, [the communion of saints] the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; [and the life everlasting. Amen] .
