

Part 1: What do Christians believe?

Through history, people have been asking this very same question. It wasn't long after the first Christian churches started that those who led them began to discuss exactly what it was that Christians believe. Jesus himself had left the best example possible of how God intends us to live and he had spent time teaching his disciples too. But there were some who tried to twist and distort Jesus' teaching for their own benefit and it wasn't long before these new churches were in danger of becoming confused about *what Christians believe* and losing their way.

Much of the Bible (the New Testament) was written by people who knew Jesus well in order to help those first Christians understand *what Christians believe*. The amazing thing is that those same words which were written so long ago can still help us today to understand *what Christians believe* and how to live a Christian life. So the best way to find out how Jesus lived his life and what he taught is to read the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John); to understand how the first Christian church began, read the book of Acts; to read about the struggles those first Christians had and what they did about them, read the letters in the New Testament (such as Romans, Corinthians, Galatians etc...).

The first part of the Bible (the Old Testament) tells the story of how God interacted with people before Jesus was born. Even though it was written thousands of years ago, it still speaks to us today about who God is and what he is like. We believe that all those people who wrote the Bible didn't just make it up or write it like any other history book but were inspired by God – that's why it is still as relevant to us today as it was to those who first read it. The best answers to the question: 'What do Christians believe?' can be found by reading the Bible.

It wasn't too long before the leaders of the first Christian churches had started to develop a statement which outlined fairly clearly *what Christians believe*. By the early part of the second century, if you were to ask a Christian what they believed, they might well answer you by quoting that statement, called a Creed. Some church traditions still quote it regularly in their services today. It's called the Apostles Creed;

The Apostles' Creed

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
 2. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
 3. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
 4. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
 5. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again.
 6. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 7. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
 8. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 9. the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
 10. the forgiveness of sins,
 11. the resurrection of the body,
 12. and life everlasting.
- Amen.

After a particularly nasty controversy happened in the church (the Arian Controversy) a new Creed, based on this original one, was written in the fourth century by a group of Church leaders representing the different Christian churches across the ancient world. Its main purpose was to clarify that Jesus is and always has been God. It's called the Nicene Creed because the Church leaders met in Nicaea (now in modern Turkey). These Creeds have acted as a 'yardstick' of correct Christian belief through the ages against those who tried to twist Jesus' teaching to suit themselves.

It might be helpful to use the Nicene Creed alongside the Bible to help us to think a bit more about *what Christians believe*. We'll take each statement in turn, read the relevant Bible verses and then stop to consider what we think about them.

The Nicene Creed

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

(Genesis 1:1, 1 Corinthians 8:6)

How do you think the world came into being?

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.*

(1 Corinthians 8:6, John 1:1-5)

Who do you think Jesus is?

*For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.*

(Matthew 1:18-23, John 1:14, Romans 8:3)

Why do you think Jesus chose to come down from heaven and become human?

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;*

(John 19:16, John 19:32-34, John 20:11-18, Isaiah 53:3-9, Romans 5:6-8, 1 Thessalonians 5:10)

For my sake? – Why did Jesus die for me?

*he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

(Mark 16:19, Acts 10:42-43, Luke 1:32-33, John 3:16-18)

If Jesus is coming again and will judge each of us, what ought our response to be now?

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.*

(Genesis 1:2, John 14:15-17 & 25-26, Acts 2:1-4, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 1:13-14, 2Peter 1:20-21)

Jesus was called Immanuel which means 'God *with us*', but the Bible says that since Pentecost, Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit is *in us* to help us live out what we believe. What are the 'fruits' of God's Spirit living in us?

*We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen*

(Acts 2:37-39, 1Corinthians 15:35-38 & 42, Revelation 21:1-5)

(We're going to talk more about baptism in our next session...)

What do you think happens when we die?

Creeds like this can be helpful summaries of *what Christians believe* but they don't replace reading the Bible and slowly but surely finding out more and more about how Jesus lived and what he taught us to believe. But even those who have been Christians for years are still in the process of doing that.

Ultimately, it comes down to a decision. We've heard how God has shown how much he loves us by sending Jesus to die for us (Romans 5:8), and now we have a choice to make. We can choose to respond by saying 'thanks but no thanks', or we can choose to become a Christian and begin an ongoing journey of learning more about how to live life God's way. For some, becoming a Christian is a very gradual process whilst for others it is a sudden decision – there's no right or wrong way. The important thing is that there is a change of heart, a recognition that Jesus died for us so that we could have a fresh start, and a desire to live life God's way with his help from now on. You might find praying a prayer like the one below helps to 'mark' the beginning of this journey with God;

Father God,

I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. (Take a few moments to ask for his forgiveness for anything in particular that is on your conscience.) Please forgive me.

I now turn from everything which I know is wrong.

Thank you that you sent your Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and have a fresh start in life. From now on I will follow and obey him as my Lord.

Thank you that you now offer me this gift of forgiveness and your Spirit; I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit and help me to live life your way from now on.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

If you have any questions or just want to chat about things that have come to mind during this session, I am more than happy to meet up sometime, chat on the phone, or have a conversation by email. My contact details are;

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Bible References (from the New Living Translation)

Genesis 1:1

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

1 Corinthians 8:6

⁶ But we know that there is only one God, the Father, who created everything, and we live for him. And there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom God made everything and through whom we have been given life.

John 1:1-12

¹ In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

² He existed in the beginning with God.

³ God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.

⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

Matthew 1:18-23

¹⁸ This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

²³ "Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means 'God is with us.'"

John 1:14

¹⁴ So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

Romans 8:3

³ The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

John 19:16 & 32-34

¹⁶ Then Pilate turned Jesus over to them to be crucified...

³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus. ³³ But when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead, so they didn't break his legs. ³⁴ One of the soldiers, however, pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out.

John 20:11-18

¹¹ Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. ¹² She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

¹⁴ She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. ¹⁵ "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?"

She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

¹⁶ "Mary!" Jesus said.

She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

¹⁷ "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

Romans 5:6-8

⁶ When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷ Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

1 Thessalonians 5:10

¹⁰ Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever.

Mark 16:19

¹⁹ When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honour at God's right hand.

Acts 1:9-11

⁹ After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. ¹⁰ As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"

Acts 10:42-43

⁴² And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. ⁴³ He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name."

Luke 1:32-33

³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

John 3:16-18

¹⁶ "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.

Genesis 1:2

² The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

John 14:15-17 & 25-26

¹⁵ "If you love me, obey my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. ¹⁷ He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you.

²⁵ I am telling you these things now while I am still with you. ²⁶ But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you.

Acts 2:1-4

¹ On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. ² Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. ³ Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴ And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

Galatians 5:22-23

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

Ephesians 1:13-14

¹³ And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. ¹⁴ The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.

2 Peter 1:20-21

²⁰ Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, ²¹ or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

Acts 2:37-39 (New International Version)

³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

³⁸Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

1 Corinthians 15:35-38 & 42

³⁵ But someone may ask, "How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?" ³⁶ What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't grow into a plant unless it dies first. ³⁷ And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. ³⁸ Then God gives it the new body he wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed.

⁴² It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever.

Revelation 21:1-5

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

³ I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

⁵ And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!"