

Summary

Timothy faced false teachings in Ephesus, including myths and syncretism. Paul emphasized countering these with sound doctrine, historically reinforced by creeds that safeguard Christian truth.

Prayer

Dear Father, God of grace and truth,

You are such a good God, good Saviour, such a good Friend.

How reassuring to know that you do not condemn, but instead your wrath which I deserve has been fully satisfied through the work of your Son, Jesus Christ. So I can come to you now, the Holy One, knowing the forgiveness of my sin (oh how foul it has been), and with joy give you my heartfelt thanks and praise for who you are and what you have done.

Holy Father, may this time of worship be a hallowed hour, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Song *by Lyn DeShazo*

1. Holy words long preserved for our walk in this world
They resound with God's own heart
O let the ancient words impart
2. Words of life, words of hope, give us strength, help us cope
In this world where'er we roam
Ancient words will guide us home.

*Ancient words, ever true, changing me, changing you.
We have come with open hearts,
O let the ancient words impart.*
3. Holy words of our faith handed down to this age
Came to us through sacrifice
O heed the faithful words of Christ.

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Scripture

- 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 15-17

Message "The Need For Creed"

Timothy had an issue with some activists in Ephesus who were promoting teachings and ideas that were contrary to God's word. False doctrine, myths, pointless discussions and an emphasis on ancestry all were having a detrimental effect. "Where do they all come from?" might have been a question Timothy asked long before Paul McCartney did.

The Need For Creed

Ephesus was a proud and religious town, centred on the temple of the goddess Artemis, and there was major opposition to the Gospel. Paul, by his preaching, had managed to make enemies of the local silversmiths and tradies (Acts 19:23ff). It's likely that a mixture of Artemis based teaching and Old Testament law, IE syncretism, infiltrated the church – Artemis wasn't going to just sulk off. Timothy was encouraged by Paul to counter all this with “sound doctrine”.

False doctrine and heresy have been present throughout the history of the Christian church to this very day, and will continue. To counter it is to understand and present “sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God.” Paul did not say to Timothy that false teaching was to be countered with clear statements from Scripture. Instead he called for “sound doctrine”. This is not to say that clear statements from Scripture are ineffective. Far from it; look at how Jesus used Scripture. But it strongly suggests that there was a set of beliefs, whether written down or memorized, that constituted sound doctrine which could be used to counter false teaching.

So what constitutes sound doctrine?

It is evident from what has been written on the subject of Christian doctrine over the years that there is no one answer. From comprehensive tomes on systematic theology and Bible dictionaries, through “what Christians believe” books, to papers on highly specific topics, that there is a never ending debate on what constitutes sound doctrine.

One solution has been to establish what are known as Creeds to define and place boundaries around what is sound doctrine, and to be learnt and recited by Christians. There are other documents called by different names which serve a similar purpose: Confessions, Declarations and Catechisms. These define, sometimes quite explicitly, how Scripture is to be understood and interpreted on a range of topics, their development often triggered by some contemporary theological dispute.

Paul's letters suggest that creeds were already in use in the early church, which in itself is a Scriptural endorsement of the use of creeds today. While there is some dispute over what is a creedal statement in Scripture, there is general agreement by commentators and Bible students that certain phrases and statements found in Scripture were common expressions of foundational truths, what we would refer to as creeds.

For example, Paul refers to “saying” and confession. “The *saying* is trustworthy,” Paul says. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” (1 Tim. 1:15-16), and “Great indeed, we *confess*, is the mystery: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” (1 Tim. 3:16). These read very much like creeds that were recited by the early Christians.

Then there is “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” from Deuteronomy (6:4), and “Jesus Christ is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3, Romans 10:9).

The whole section of Philippians 2:5-11 is considered by many to be creedal in nature, and the way it is printed in some translations reinforces that understanding.

The Need For Creed

It's interesting that Paul refers to "my gospel" rather than "the Scriptures" as the plumb line for truth and the reference point for "sound doctrine" ¹.

Today, it seems, we are more and more surrounded by questionable doctrines or proposals for our consideration, including challenges to what we thought were non-negotiable and long held positions.

One of the prompts for this message is my recent read of sermons presented in the last few months by a theological graduate and candidate for the UCA ministry whom I will call "M". Some of these sermons question what most, if not all, of us who receive these weekly services would believe and consider orthodox Biblical truths about death, the believer's resurrection, evangelism, salvation, heaven and hell, and more. These sermons are eloquently written with apparent learning and study, and I dare say, for those who hear such sermons regularly, persuasive. But they are a "different doctrine" not "in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God". So how can they be countered? One way is to dig into the Scriptures and do one's own research, which is commendable and preferred (Acts 17:11), but time consuming and few will do it, either through lack of time or simply not knowing how to. This is where creeds come into their own.

Keeping in mind the Biblical precedent touched on earlier, creeds are useful because they:

- help avoid incomplete understanding of the Christian faith;
- define and safeguard truth;
- provide a defence against error; and,
- have withstood the test of time (IE of robust debate over centuries).

Creeds are not Scripture. They are not infallible and should not be used in place of Scripture, but they provide a helpful summary of topics, based on Scripture, making it easier for Christians to articulate what they believe.

But of the many creeds available, which ones should be used²? The standard two which have broad, but not universal, acceptance are The Apostles' Creed (150AD – 800AD) and the Nicene Creed³ (325AD). A third but lesser known is the more complicated Athanasian Creed (500?AD). The UCA heritage includes the Scots Confession of Faith (1560), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Westminster Catechism (1647), Savoy Declaration (1658, much the same as Westminster Catechism) and John Wesley's 44 sermons⁴. These have very clear and direct statements about the subjects referred to above.

Now we to turn to some of the specific teachings that Christians are hearing from "M", and no doubt others of similar persuasion, which I will contrast with these ancient creeds. The first quote in each section is from "M", the next by contrast are from the creeds:

¹ "My gospel", or similar terms appears numerous times in Paul's letters: Romans 2:16, 16:25, 1 Corinthians 15:1, Gal 1:11, Ephesians 3:7, 1 Timothy 1:11, 2 Timothy 2:8

² During the sixteenth century alone, numerous creeds and confessions were published: Luther's 99 theses (1517), Zwingli's 67 Articles (1523), The Schleithem Confession (1527), Luther's Small Catechism (1529), The Augsburg Confession (1530), The Genevan Confession (1536), The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Decrees of the Council of Trent (1563), Profession of the Tridentine Faith (1564), The 39 Articles of the Church of England (1571).

³ Acceptance of The Nicene Creed is required of those people who apply for PCW work in schools.

⁴ The UCA position is "to learn ... from" these creeds.

Resurrection of the body

“We are no more than our momentary place in the fabric of all things ... dissipated in death ... all dust returned not only to the earth but the emptiness of space... there was beauty enough, love enough, mercy enough, justice enough to have made this whole ambivalent world not only worth it, but an abundant gift.” (M)

- “At the last day ... all the dead shall be raised up with the self-same bodies ... with different qualities.” (Westminster)
- “My body, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like unto the glorious body of Christ.” (Heidelberg Catechism)

Heaven and Hell

“Our lives live on [only⁵] in the aftermath of our effects on the world.” (M)

- “The souls of the righteous ... are received into the highest heavens ... and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell.” (Westminster)
- “Those who now serve the devil in all abominations shall be tormented forever, both in body and spirit.” (Scots Confession of Faith)

Evangelism and Salvation

“[Evangelism is] trying to get people participating in God's mission. [It] is not about who is ‘saved’ or not, but about who is an active participant in God's mission. ... God saves all people. ... Conversion [is] not so much about a transition from unsaved to saved, but rather our ongoing transition from passive to active participation in God's mission”⁶ (M)

- “[Those who] never truly come to Christ ... cannot be saved. To assert ... that they may, is very pernicious.” (Westminster)
- “We utterly abhor the blasphemy of those who hold that men who live according to equity and justice shall be saved.” (Scots Confession of Faith)

Same sex marriage

How to speak against SSM when it was endorsed by some theologians on the basis of Scripture? You can of course quote the OT and Jesus himself: “A man shall leave his mother and father ...”, but you could also quote the Westminster Catechism, or Savoy Declaration, which state quite simply: “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman.”

These examples are given not just to highlight present day false teaching but to illustrate how creeds have been, and are, helpful to maintain “sound doctrine”. The Truth of God’s Kingdom is under constant attack. The enemy’s purpose and effort remain unchanged. Each one of us has a responsibility to maintain that Amos plumb line of truth and righteousness and so judge with a right judgment (John 7:24) between truth and counterfeit.

I trust this is helpful. I commend to you the use and reading of Creeds.

⁵ I add the word ‘only’ because this is the overall gist of “M’s” understanding on this subject.

⁶ That is to say, everybody is already ‘saved’, regardless of their present confession. Evangelism is to get people to understand that. Being ‘saved’ in the contemporary use of the word is to move from passive to active members of God’s Kingdom. (This is not the standard Universalist’s position.)

Prayers for suffering Christians: *from Barnabas Prayer for 25/8/24*

Sovereign Lord,

We pray for Christians imprisoned in Eritrea for their faith in you. We pray that where they suffer from excess of heat and cold, hunger and thirst, beatings and torture, you will supply abundant comfort by your Spirit abiding in them. We pray for your sustaining power for pastors and theological students, who often receive worse treatment than other believers. Please strengthen and encourage the flocks that have been deprived of their shepherds and guide them in your paths of righteousness.

We ask that they know the loving hand of the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. (Psalm 23:3)

HYMN *by H.W. Baker*

1. Lord, thy word abideth, and our footsteps guideth;
 who its truth believeth light and joy receiveth.
2. When our foes are near us, then thy word doth cheer us,
 word of consolation, message of salvation.
3. When the storms are o'er us, and dark clouds before us,
 then its light directeth, and our way protecteth.
4. Who can tell the pleasure, who recount the treasure
 by thy word imparted to the simple-hearted?
5. Word of mercy, giving succour to the living;
 word of life, supplying comfort to the dying.
6. O that we discerning its most holy learning,
 Lord, may love and fear thee, evermore be near thee!

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen.

This service was prepared by Warren Mack for HopeNet SA