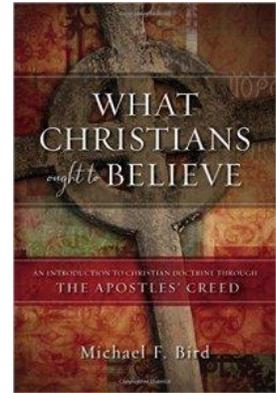


What Christians Ought to Believe

Some Highlights & Comments

Michael Bird's [*What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles' Creed*](#) is an outstanding resource for basic Christian doctrine. For those not familiar with Bird, he is solidly grounded (and educated [wink]) in Christian origins and New Testament theology, which makes him eminently qualified to write a book on the most cherished Apostles' Creed.



One of the issues raised at the outset is the I-don't-need-no-creed-coz-I-got-the-Bible attitude. He convincingly argues “creeds are biblical,” since the Bible itself contains creeds ([Deut 6:4-5](#); [Mk. 12:29](#); [1 Cor. 8:6](#)). He opines that the historic “creeds are really a summary of the New Testament tradition: the text and its history of interpretation” (p 22), on which see more [here](#).

I do wish, however, he had teased out why the Eastern churches do not utilize the Apostles' Creed. He boldly states “the Apostles' Creed is the faith that all professing Christians should know, what all pastors and priests should teach, and what all bishops and theologians should defend” (p 26), yet previously observed that “it is not used in the Eastern churches” (p 25). This only piqued my curiosity, so I've some research to do on my own.

Chapter 2 shows the “symbiotic relationship between creed and canon” (p 30) and nicely illustrates and explains the relationship between the canonization of Old and New Testaments to the historical creeds. In my opinion, this is one area of strength in Bird, as he has written also and presented on the topics of inerrancy, inspiration, and infallibility of the Scriptures. He concludes the chapter with some practical ways the creeds can “invigorate” our faith.

Chapter 3 begins the exposition of the Apostles' Creed and spells out the nature of faith in general terms, the “I believe” opening of the Creed in specific terms, and insists that “all of our life is a constant expression of faith” (p 47). Here he deals with faith as trust, faith and obedience, faith and reason, and the value of doubt (which I was please to read since I've [written on this](#) previously). He dispels the notion of a hard fideism (faith in spite of reason or doubt) and claims that “faith is not like a person blindly jumping in the dark. Faith is more like a leap into the light” because “faith in Jesus brings illumination to the world around us” (p 51).

Chapter 4 includes topics on the fatherhood of God, the power of God, the Trinity, and the creator God, giving us a grounding in theology 101 and is solidly Trinitarian from start to finish.

Creation is a cooperative effort by all members of the Godhead. How so? The biblical witness is clear that God is the creator (see [Gen 1:1](#); [Isa 45:18](#); [Mark 13:19](#); [Eph 3:9](#)). However, specific roles are assigned to the specific members of the Godhead within the act of creating itself. God the Father is the one “from whom all things came” ([1 Cor 8:6](#); see [Mal 2:10](#); [Rom 11:36](#); [Heb 2:10](#)). Jesus Christ is the one “through whom all things came” ([1 Cor 8:6](#)) and “in him all things were created” ([Col 1:16](#)). The Spirit of God was active in creation as the one who “hovered” over the primordial waters to bring life into existence ([Gen 1:2](#)) and is generally associated with the impartation of life into living creatures ([Job 33:4](#); [John 6:63](#); [Rom 8:10](#)). (pp 70-71)

Chapter 5 speaks to the divine and human natures of the Son and is an outstanding introduction to Christology. I do think that briefly introducing the notion of *perichoresis* (“mutual indwelling”) as it relates to the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ would be useful here. This is a neglected

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motif in Trinitarian studies, even among academics, which has the unfortunate effect of beginners in theology never learning. As I've [reviewed elsewhere](#), Charles Twombly's *Perichoresis and Personhood* does a tremendous job in showing how *perichoresis* applies to the hypostatic union of Christ's human and divine natures.

Chapter 6 unpacks the role of Jesus as Messiah and Lord and clearly ties together various biblical themes (kingdom, covenant, Adam, Israel, redemption, et al.) into the person of Christ. Regarding Jesus's lordship, Bird repeats "The term 'Lord' has become one of the most lifeless words in the Christian vocabulary" (from Carl Henry's *God, Revelation, and Authority* 2:239) and laments "when the title 'Lord' lost its reverence, it also lost its relevance and was reduced to something like 'a spiritually meaningful religious leader.'" For new believers or mature, this has immanent import on so many levels and there is much discussion and self-assessment that readers should consider here. Daily.

Chapter 7 explicates the "Virgin Birth", which has been all but lost in today's Christian parlance. It is rarely mentioned in blogs, sermons, Facebook posts, or even seminary classrooms, except to give it its due in a beginning systematic theology course. Bird here does a great job showing not only its importance, but in exposing its *relative* importance with regards to the crux of one's faith. He wisely and reasonably argues:

While a view of Jesus that defines the virgin conception might be problematic, a story of Jesus without it is not necessarily deficient. To say otherwise would be to render Mark, John, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews christologically challenged for not mentioning Jesus's birth. For such reasons, I'm inclined to understand the nativity stories as a clarification to Jesus's divine sonship rather than the necessary grounds for it. As a doctrine, the virgin conception is not essential to Christian testimony, but neither is it completely dispensable since it features prominently in a fully orbed doctrine of Jesus's person. (p 102)

Bird rightly shows that the Virgin Birth does not play into the notion of Jesus's sinlessness (pp 104-105), but does show the necessity of it in relation Christ's humanity and especially to God's redemptive plan through Israel. Moreover, and particularly poignant is how the birth of Jesus plays into eschatology.

Imagine a woman in the throes of childbirth, screaming in pain, with her legs spread apart. Imagine also that standing over the woman is a seven-headed dragon, who is crouched, poised, salivating, and ready to devour the child as soon as it is expelled from the birth canal. It reads like a nativity scene directed by Quentin Tarrantino, doesn't it! But cast your eyes over Revelation 12[:1-11].. (p 105)

Wowers! Of course this is a dramatic reenactment, but when one does read Rev 12 (and following) we find that the birth of Jesus is no small thing to gloss over.

Chapters 8-9 deal with the core of the Creed – "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried" – and rightly belongs at the core of the book. All chapters before and after point to these two chapters and all of Christendom points to the cross of Christ. ***All, without exception!*** The crux of Christian belief is Christ's death and these chapters are the longest and most detailed.

Bird illustrates the foolishness of the gospel in the company of a secular, Jewish, or post-modern mind. Though the circumstances surrounding Jesus's death are grounded in history and

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categorically undeniable, it is the *significance* of his death that is lost on the unbelieving. Nevertheless, God's purposes remain. He writes:

Pilate's wickedness and weakness were conscripted by God as the means whereby his saving promises came to fruition. It was really God who delivered Jesus over to death for our sins and raised him to life for our justification ([Rom 4:25](#)) and God who "did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all" ([Rom 8:32](#)) ... In fulfillment of the scriptural promises Jesus's death brought about the end of exile – not only Israel's exile from the divine presence but even more importantly the exile of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Jesus's crucifixion brought about the end of enmity and the end of estrangement between God and humanity. (pp 124-125)

Further, Bird discusses the various theories/images of atonement and notes that it is "very difficult to reduce the effect of the cross to just one of these" though "each of them is saying something that is either true or at least partially true" (pp 129, 131). He wisely concludes that "the promise of forgiveness is an aptly abbreviated summary of the message of the gospel" and "as such, talking about 'forgiveness' should easily be our go-to image for unpacking the significance of Jesus's death, the atonement, and the offer of salvation" (p 130). I could not agree more and the theme of forgiveness would certainly resonate with believer and unbeliever alike. Bird does, however, admit to gravitating "toward the victory theory as the integrative model for the atonement" (p 133).

The time taken on [Gal 2:20](#) was moving. He writes:

Paul is saying here that he has no independent existence and no separate identity apart from the crucified and risen Jesus. The entire scope of his bodily existence is singularly determined by the fact that the body of the Son of God was crucified for him, and the Son of God now lives in him. Think about that. If we take Paul's self-description as our own, it means that the only life in me is Christ living through me. It means that I am who I am only as I am in Christ Jesus...when I know who I am in Christ, then I know my place in this world and the purpose of my life. (p 136)

Bird continues a clarion call to a cruciform life grounded in service and sacrifice, which is the true mark of the authentic believer and separates "fans from the followers" (p 138).

Chapter 10 deals head on with the descent of Jesus and the time between his crucifixion and resurrection. Bird boldly states that "Jesus could not have been in hell ... because, well, hell did not yet exist" (p 144; cf., [Rev 20:14](#)). Instead, Jesus descended to *Hades* (Greek) or *Sheol* (Hebrew), the waiting place of the dead. Maintaining (apparently as a dualist) that Jesus suffered death by separation of soul from body, Bird notes that Jesus's "body was surrendered to the grave, and his soul entered the domain of death, the world beyond the grave" (p 145).

Challenging the notion (argued by Wayne Grudem) that Jesus's descent was a late-comer to the Creed, Bird says this is "totally false; it is right that the descent is in the Apostles' Creed, and we are right to profess it" (pp 146-157).

The chapter finishes with showing the "terror and tyranny of death," the "death of death," and, naturally, the resurrection and its significance. Bird makes a strong, biblical case for the

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resurrection being tied to our salvation and not just life after death and I applaud him for doing so, since this idea is all but lost in most discussions on soteriology.

Chapter 11 is on the ascension of Jesus and highlights the importance of it. The “ascension marks the end of the resurrection appearances and the beginning of Jesus’s session as the Father’s vice-regent,” the sending of the Holy Spirit, empowerment of the Church for witness, the beginning of Trinitarian worship among God’s people, proof that the last days have arrived, the beginning of the era of Jesus’s return to earth, and demonstrates that “God has placed a human being at the helm of the universe” just as he intended all along (p 164; cf., [Gen 1:28](#)). The chapter unpacks details around each of these themes and gives valid, practical insights throughout.

Chapter 12 is devoted exclusively to the Holy Spirit and his ministry, role, function, personhood and divine being. Yet Bird begins (and I especially appreciated this emphasis) by showing that “a good starting point will be making explicit the connection between the Holy Spirit and the gospel [since this connection is] the ballast to our ecclesiastical ship” (p 183). After all, “the Holy Spirit is ... the glue that connects us to the Son ... the bond ... and agent of our union with Christ” (pp 184, 185). Moreover, and “crucial to our understanding of divine revelation” is the fact that “the Spirit not only reveals things but also ensures the effectiveness of the revelation itself” (p 189). Not only does the Spirit ‘flip the switch’ so to speak, but he guarantees that what is seen by the light is understood by the mind and empowered by the will. Just as the Spirit gives spiritual gifts to and manifests spiritual fruit in God’s people, so too does the Spirit reveal, illumine, and empower God’s people to embrace God’s truth and imitate God’s character.

Chapter 13 Church. That is the topic of this chapter and Bird hits it hard. Those who claim a ‘churchless’ Christianity will find significant challenges here, but also resonate with much. Throughout the emphasis on communal Christianity is evident. Individual believers “become something together that they are not themselves individually,” since “we are Christians only if we are churchians.” After all, “our identity in Christ cannot be understood apart from our membership in the corporate body of Christ” (p 194).

Expanding on the Apostles’ Creed to include the Nicene Creed, Bird explicates four marks of the true Church: oneness (Nicene only), holiness (Nicene & Apostles’), catholic (Nicene & Apostles’), and apostolic (Nicene only), all of which are adjectives rather than nouns. He graphically (and humorously) illustrates that today’s increasingly secular, post-modern culture that “the church is no long the moral majority; it is now the immoral minority with offensive views on everything from family to religious pluralism and sexuality” (p 203), but also challenges the Church to redeem the times and make use of opportunities to attract the culture creatively and winsomely with the person of Jesus.

Chapter 14, the final chapter, brings us to the themes of forgiveness and the future. Bird calls attention to the various aspects or tenses of salvation (‘I have been saved, I am being saved, I will be saved’). His Reformed theological bent shines brightly here (and one which I share) as he notes that there is a sense in which all believers were saved “before the creation of the world” ([Eph 1:4](#); [1 Pet 1:20](#); [Rev 13:8](#); p 209).

Just as there is no one theory of the atonement that captures the full scope of Christ’s death (cf., above, Chapter 8), so too there are varied images around the salvation event (redemption,

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reconciliation, renewal, rescue, forgiveness, justification, adoption, et al.). “It takes a few moments to describe what we are saved from, what we are saved to, and whom we are saved by” (p 210).

While these motifs are pregnant with theology and biblical witness, they demonstrate to the reader the importance of offering a thick rather than thin message of salvation. Too often, the gospel message is made so simple that it fails to communicate the richness and scope of all that is involved in the salvific event and this chapter nicely summarizes that “the gospel story.”

I was especially delighted to see Bird’s explanation of ‘things to come’ and his emphasis on the message of hope for the future. He shows the importance of getting a biblical grip on expressions like “heaven” and “paradise”, “life after death” versus “life after life after death” and “resurrection” versus “recompense.” So much of what Bird captures here has been documented by the incomparable N.T. Wright in his [*Surprised by Hope*](#) and I was pleased to see references to J. Richard Middleton’s [*A New Heaven and a New Earth*](#) as well as Murray Harris’s [*Raised Immortal*](#). These sources, above most others in these genres, have made a large impact upon me and countless others in bringing clarity, keen exegesis, and theological vigor. Bird’s chapter nicely and accurately summarizes many of these findings.

I will note that Bird does not devote much space to the idea of annihilation and what has come to be understood as “conditional immortality”, which has gained wider acceptance and momentum in the Church over the past few decades. Instead, Bird’s position is the traditional one regarding the fate of unbelievers, viz., eternal conscious torment. He writes “Hell, then, is the eternal and punitive quarantining of a humanity that has ceased to be human,” since the *imago Dei* has been snuffed out by continual sin (p 217).

The chapter wraps up with a careful and creative demonstration of the “new heavens and new earth” that will some day merge into one eternal abode for all believers who have resurrected bodies in the presence of God to reign with God over the new cosmos.

Finally, the good doctor offers a helpful table in the appendix titled “Early Texts and Traditions Associated with the Apostles’ Creed” that I found theologically intriguing and historically valuable.

Postscript: The end of each chapter contains “The Story Thus Far” summarizing the teachings of the Creed and chapter contents. The end of the last chapter brings it all together with “The Story Complete.” I quote it here at length because it is outstanding in every way, contains the gospel message, and will, I hope, show the appreciation for this Creed of creeds. I encourage readers to embrace these most cherished truths.

The story of our faith, as the Apostles’ Creed teaches us, is this: we believe in God, the Father almighty, from whom the Son is eternally begotten and from whom the Spirit proceeds, one God in three persons. God the Father, with the Son and the Spirit acting like his hands, is the creator of heaven and earth. Humanity was created to rule over God’s creation but fell into transgression and corruption. God’s saving plan and promise was to rescue this world, and this rescue began with the call of Abraham and with his covenant with Israel, through whom the promised deliverer would come. It is in the midst of Israel that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. His mission was to bring Israel’s story to its climax and to dethrone the evil that tyrannized the world. His gospel of the

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kingdom drew together the nucleus of a renewed Israel among his followers, who would carry God's purposes forward to the ends of the earth. After Jesus came to Jerusalem for one fateful visit, he suffered under the injustice of Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and, was buried. Jesus's death was an atonement of sins, his resurrection on the third day was the start of the new creation, and his ascension into heaven marked the beginning of a new divine order over the world. The church now has the duty of living in the power of the Holy Spirit to declare the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of all things. We do this until the glorious day when Jesus returns from heaven to put the world to rights, to judge the living and the dead, to rescue his people, and to bring them into the new heaven and new earth. The goal of our hope is not a disembodied bliss in heaven but rather the resurrection of the body and life everlasting in God's new world. This is the Christian story, the church's story, the story we live by, the story which gets our "amen." This is the story we sing about and proclaim until such a time when "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" ([Rev 21:3](#)) [pp 219-220].