
Basic Christianity – the ABCs of the Faith

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

JUDE 3-4 (ESV)

That we even have to ask the question, “What is basic or essential to Christianity?” is the direct result of the fog created by cults like JW.org/The Watchtower. For about 16 centuries the churches have answered this question with The Apostles’ Creed. The fog was created with the emergence of Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, Christian Science, Christadelphianism, Theosophy and Russellism in the 2 generations between 1830 and 1890. These groups, and many others too, threw up a wide variety of “new light” which somehow had been ignored, they claimed, by the mainline churches. This “chaos of the cults” had one loud cry in common – a repudiation of many of the essential doctrines shared by the churches. In addition to the doctrinal deviations, these messengers of “new light” usually shared the claim that their peculiar teachings were actually “old light”, truths of the original Christianity long suppressed by the Catholic Church, even by the Protestant churches.

The Apostles’ Creed – the witness of 400-500 AD

Even more self-condemning than the wildly divided “new light” of the cults was their shared fatal flaw: ALL of the ‘new religions’ rejected the simple Gospel of the churches as reflected in The Apostles’ Creed. Here is the creed which goes back at least to the 5th century, to the days before Christendom became divided into denominations: [version in the Anglican “Book of Common Prayer”, 1662]

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth:
And in Jesus Christ his only 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 hell;
The third day he rose again 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 Catholick Church;
The Communion of Saints;
The Forgiveness of sins;
The Resurrection of the body,
And the Life everlasting.
Amen.

Witness 5 generations after the Apostles – TERTULLIAN of Carthage (ca. 215 AD)

Tertullian is the outstanding early witness we have from North Africa, some 5 generations after the Apostles. His testimony is particularly valuable as an independent testimony to the catholicity of orthodox Christology more than a century before Trinitarianism became the official doctrine of the universal church.

We, however, as we indeed always have done and more especially since we have been better instructed by the Paraclete, who leads men indeed into all truth), believe that there is one only God, but under the following dispensation, or oikonomia, as it is called, that this one only God has also a Son, His Word, who proceeded from Himself, by whom all things were made, and without whom nothing was made. Him we believe to have been sent by the Father into the Virgin, and to have been born of her -- being both Man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and to have been called by the name of Jesus Christ; we believe Him to have suffered, died, and been buried, according to the Scriptures, and, after He had been raised again by the Father and taken back to heaven, to be sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that He will come to judge the quick and the dead; who sent also from heaven from the Father, according to His own promise, the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost. That this rule of faith has come down to us from the beginning of the gospel, even before any of the older heretics, much more before Praxeas, a pretender of yesterday, will be apparent both from the lateness of date which marks all heresies, and also from the absolutely novel character of our new-fangled Praxeas. In this principle also we must henceforth find a presumption of equal force against all heresies whatsoever -- that whatever is first is true, whereas that is spurious which is later in date.

– Against Praxeas, chapter 2

Witness 3 generations after the Apostles – IRENAEUS, Bishop of Lyons (ca. 180 AD)

Irenaeus, writing toward the end of the 2nd century, discussed the "rule of faith" or "rule of truth." among the churches in his day. In "Against Heresies" (1.9.4) he talks about this rule of faith being received by baptism and continues, in the next chapter, to explain:

Chapter X.- Unity of the Faith of the Church Throughout the Whole World

1. The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, "every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess" to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send "spiritual wickednesses," and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.

2. As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth.

For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it.

— Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10

Witness a generation after the Apostles – IGNATIUS, Bishop of Antioch (ca. 110 AD)

Ignatius, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, took time to warn the Trallians (the church in Tralles, Asia Minor) about threats to the faith once for all time delivered to the saints. Here are chapters 9-11, where Ignatius reminds the Trallians of the Gospel they are fighting for, and the nature of the heresy they are to oppose:

9:1 Be ye deaf therefore, when any man speaketh to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, who was the Son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth; 9:2 who moreover was truly raised from the dead, His Father having raised Him, who in the like fashion will so raise us also who believe on Him -- His Father, I say, will raise us -- in Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have not true life. 10:1 But if it were as certain persons who are godless, that is unbelievers, say, that He suffered only in semblance, being themselves mere semblance, why am I in bonds? And why also do I desire to fight with wild beasts? So I die in vain. Truly then I lie against the Lord. 11:1 Shun ye therefore those vile offshoots that gender a deadly fruit, whereof if a man taste, forthwith he dieth. For these men are not the Father's planting: for if they had been, they would have been seen to be branches of the Cross, and their fruit imperishable -- the Cross whereby He through His passion inviteth us, being His members. Now it cannot be that a head should be found without members, seeing that God promiseth union, and this union is Himself. (Lightfoot translation)

Witness of JOHN (ca. 95-100 AD)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4, ESV)

Witness of PAUL (ca. 55-56 AD)

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in

accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Corinthians 15:1-11, ESV)

Witness of PETER (ca. 33-35 AD)

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. (Acts 10:34-44; it has been frequently remarked that Peter's first sermon to a Gentile audience is a summary outline of the Gospel of Mark, which Gospel tradition says is based on the memoirs of Peter.)