What's a Christian, Anyway?

Finding Our Way in an Age of Confusion and Corruption

GLENN PACKIAM

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

What's a Christian, Anyway?

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Nelson Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Published in association with The Bindery Agency, www.TheBinderyAgency.com.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com.

ISBN 978-1-4002-4830-8 (TP)
ISBN 978-1-4002-4831-5 (audiobook)
ISBN 978-1-4002-4827-8 (ePub)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on File

Printed in the United States of America

$PrintCode

For the people of Rockharbor Church—
Keep believing and living like it's true (because it is).

NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
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.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
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;
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.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
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.
(1975 Ecumenical)

Contents

Author's Note

This book began as a sermon series, first preached at my previous congregation in Colorado Springs ten years ago. But the seeds were planted in worship six years before that when we began confessing the Nicene Creed regularly at our evangelical, charismatic megachurch. I saw people on the edge of deconstruction glimmer with hope as they began to discover a faith bigger than the tainted American church they knew. They were being invited into a mystery that transcended the tidy certainty they had grown up with. When we finally did a sermon series on the Nicene Creed, expounding on the meaning of each phrase and connecting them to the words of Scripture they were built on, it became clear that this ancient confession of Christian faith had something to say to the church today.

When we moved to California three years ago, I revisited the series, rewriting each sermon for a new context and a new

cultural moment. Retrieving the wisdom of an old creed for a people known for innovation and forward thinking seemed counterintuitive. But their response was surprising. Through dozens of conversations—in the lobby and hallways, in my office and in coffee shops all over Orange County—I heard how fresh this vision of God and of the Christian life was. People were struck by the beauty and simplicity of it all. And even more than that, they found it profoundly helpful in cutting through the fog to return to the heart of what it means to truly be a Christian.

As I've traveled around the United States and other parts of the world, speaking to pastors and church leaders in a variety of different contexts, I heard stories of how difficult it has been to help people sort through the things that matter and the things that don't. Followers of Jesus are struggling to know what things are essential to our faith and what things are peripheral—or worse, are distortions and corruptions. The scandals and abuses of church leaders have only heaped pain on their confusion. These conversations confirmed my own pastoral experience of walking with the disappointed and disillusioned, the disoriented and disrupted. "Tell me about the faith you've left," I want to say. "Chances are, it was not Christianity anyway."

Through it all, the fire for this project began to burn hotter. We need help finding our way. We need to know what it means to be a Christian.

I offer this backdrop for two reasons: first, to provide a bit of a peek into the origins of this book; and secondly, to

offer my gratitude. To the people I have the privilege of serving as pastor—and to all in previous seasons—I am profoundly grateful to be a witness to God at work in your lives and to be allowed to join in that work in some small way. To the pastors and church leaders who have opened up to me and become fellow travelers on the road to resilience in ministry and personal health, I count it a privilege to be numbered among you. May God continue to grant us the grace to love well and lead faithfully those whom God has entrusted to our care.

Ultimately, this book has come from the church, and it is written *for* the church. I have labored over these words in the hope that we would be, in Lesslie Newbigin's words, the "hermeneutic of the gospel"—*a way for everyone to know that Jesus is good news for the world*.

Foreword

There was once a time when GPS satellite navigation didn't exist, and people had to rely on massive, fold-out paper maps to navigate. My wife says she loved those giant, physical maps because she could see the full picture of where she was going—the entire journey laid out in front of her. Now, imagine with me for a moment; you and your family are returning home from an epic road trip. You're driving through the back roads of the Appalachian Mountains. It's dark. Road signs are covered by trees. Then your digital navigation goes out! Panic sets in as you realize you don't have one of those big old maps! You are mapless. You drive, hoping to find the right direction or someone to help. But all you find is that you are lost in the back country of the Appalachian Mountains. Your

gas tank is nearing empty. You want nothing more than to get home, but without a map, you're stuck, confused, and dazed.

That disorientation is where many followers of Jesus find themselves in the twenty-first-century American church. Nothing seems simple or easy. People are negatively deconstructing their faith or abandoning Jesus outright. Shallow discipleship plagues the church, sapping the life out of her. A consumer-driven approach to faith has left many believers unchanged and powerless. And *where do we go from here?* is the question many of us are asking as we wander in the dark in exhausting circles, unable to find our way home. It feels a little like we lost our map.

But I have some good news. In *What's a Christian, Anyway?* my friend Glenn provides us with an ancient map that will lead us home. This book is about the Nicene Creed, a time-tested guide back to the heart of the Christian faith. This ancient statement of belief shows us the way to Christ-exalting, "cruciform" life, which is the life you and I were created to experience. The gospel of King Jesus is the royal announcement that Israel's Messiah has defeated sin and death, overthrowing the powers of evil through His sinless life, sacrificial death on the cross, and His resurrection. And all who call on His beautiful name are forgiven, declared righteous, sealed by the promised Holy Spirit, and eternally united to Jesus as a covenant member of His body, the church (1 Cor. 12:12, 27).

God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit

God made Him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God, He made us pure and holy, and He freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:30–31 NLT).

Glenn, like an expert map reader, will help you find the way to your Father's house. F*irst*, you will learn that the abundant life you were created to live is found in knowing and loving the source of life, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (John 10:10).

Second, his love for the church will captivate you and spur you on to love the church and see your place in it. Glenn rightly points out that we Christians in the West tend to think individualistically, while the biblical faith is communal just as God is a triune community of co-equal, co-eternal persons. Individual salvation only exists so God can grow the global, multiethnic family that he promised Abraham long ago (Gen. 12:1–3; Gal. 3:8). Jesus, the "seed of Abraham," brings this blood-bought, Holy Spirit–birthed, Father-loved family into being (Gal. 3:16, 26–29). This family is born into peace by Christ (Eph. 2:14–16) and unified in the Spirit (Eph. 4:1–6), and has equal access to the Father (Eph. 2:18–20). "This is our vocation, our calling," Glenn reminds us.

Third, he loves God's people. On every page you will sense his love for you, the reader. As I read the book, I can see how hard Glenn fought for you to understand. He is clear, compelling, and Christ-exalting. This book is a devotional for your heart and a training manual to equip God's people for the work of ministry and for mission with Jesus.

We do not have to be lost wanderers anymore.
We have a map that leads home.

Dr. Derwin L. Gray

Cofounder and lead pastor of
Transformation Church

Author of *Lit Up with Love:*
Becoming Good-News People to
a Gospel-Starved World

CHAPTER 1

Finding Our Way Home

I'm lost. It shouldn't worry me this much—I'm not in the woods, or in a jungle, or up in the mountains, or in the desert. I am driving in the suburbs. But it's dark outside, and I have no bearings, no clue where I am. So I'm a little worried.

To be fair, this is a pretty normal occurrence for me. I have a notoriously bad sense of direction. But in my defense, we moved here not more than six months ago. I am still learning the streets and neighborhoods and freeways.

And as those close to me know, I usually rely on maps on my phone, even to tell me how to get to places that I should absolutely know how to get to on my own. But tonight, my phone won't stop freezing. I try resetting it a couple of times. But every time it turns back on, it freezes again with the screen showing half of one app and half of another. So I set aside my

malfunctioning phone and do what any normal person would do when they find themselves lost and afraid: I pray. I pray like a plane crash survivor in an Amazonian jungle. *Lord, help me*.

I drive slowly toward an intersection, vaguely confident that I should turn left. I do. It seems to get more familiar. Then I am unsure. *No need to panic*. Still, my heart is beating more quickly. The family is out of town, back in Colorado for a visit. Here I am in a beautiful neighborhood in Southern California as the hour creeps toward midnight, unable to find my way home.

Suddenly my phone awakens from its spell, casting out the demons that seized its operating system. Apple Maps opens. The address registers. A route appears.

I am saved.

Mildly lost at night on the streets of a small city is surely no crisis. But something primal reflexively signals the alarm in our bodies when we can't get home. Home is where we are oriented toward. Home is where we must go. And if our path is impeded, by peril or by sheer directionally challenged dumbness, we start to feel the tremors of danger.

Home is where safety is.

Darkness is not a time for delay.

When night falls, it is time to go home.

GOING HOME

I heard a lecture once where the speaker argued that all great stories are about *home*. A person leaves home to go on an

adventure. Or a person struggles to make his way back home. Or maybe a person fights to defend her home. Yes, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are such stories, but so is the Bible.

God creates a home for Himself and for His creatures. Humans decide to try to run the home themselves, becoming a threat. God exiles them and they must find their way back home. They can't, so God comes after them and brings them back home to Himself. More than that: God remakes the world and makes His home with humans after all. "So that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28 NIV).

Jesus told the human story as a story of two sons who leave home. One leaves to go on a self-indulgent adventure, seeking short-term pleasure around every corner; after that brother returns, the other leaves because his home is no longer conforming to his desired norms of acceptable behavior. The first stumbles on his way home, ready to accept a lower status within it; the other refuses to return home even when his status is preserved by the father.

Our own story is bound up with our home. Far as we may go, we long to return.

Within the macro stories of Scripture and the human heart, there are smaller stories, smaller journeys away from home or journeys of return that mark the moments of human history, and even church history. We mark whole eras with words like *exile* or *captivity* to describe a departure that the church has made or ground that may have been lost or situations and stability that may have shifted. A word like *exile* makes sense only because *home* makes sense. Exile is not

home. *This* is not *that.* Conversely, we use words like *renewal* or *revival* or *return* to describe a homecoming of sorts—either ours to God or God's to us. Some Christian traditions speak of a *visitation* of God, implying that God has come to make His home where He belongs: with His people. We sing a poignant phrase like "I'm coming back to the heart of worship" to indicate our own wandering and homecoming.[1]

Home is where we belong. Home is when all is right and well. And every time we cannot find our way home, like me on that mid-February night, our pulse starts to quicken.

The church in Western societies today seems to have lost its way. Faithful Christians feel it in their bones. As a pastor, I hear their questions and listen to their laments frequently. *What is going on with Christianity?* Surveys confirm my experience. Barna Group's research has found that about half of US Christians today describe present-day Christianity negatively, using phrases like "hypocritical" and "out of touch with reality." Pastors are declining in credibility, with only about a third (34 percent) of US adults saying that they would consider a pastor or a priest as a trustworthy source of wisdom on spirituality.[2] Even those who don't call themselves Christians know something is amiss. We hear various descriptors and qualifiers thrown about: *It's the evangelicals! It's the right wing. It's the left wing. It's white Christians. It's progressive Christians. It's American Christians. It's the Reformed Christians. It's the charismatics.*

But these labels are less helpful than we may imagine. We are prone to tend to the speck in another tradition's eye while remaining blind to the plank in our own. Surely it is better to simply say it the way confessions are meant to be prayed: *We have sinned. Like wandering sheep, we have lost our way.*

Good Shepherd, come lead us back home.

JENGA AND THE LOSS OF FAITH

"Losing our way" is only one way of putting it. Losing our faith, or the ability to believe, is another. When we say it like that, it is more serious, more urgent, more dire. And for many, it most certainly is. The headline is not just about the church losing her way; it is about people who have lost their faith.

When we lose our ability to believe something, it's either because the content of belief is no longer *plausible* or because the carrier is no longer *credible*. To put it another way, when we believe, we are asking two questions: Is the statement *plausible*? And is the source *credible*? In the 1960s, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann came up with the term "plausibility structure" to describe the scaffolding that sets the norms for what is considered believable. It is a subconcious framework for shaping how individuals perceive reality and interpret the world around them.

Let's try an example of a plausibility structure with a non-faith-related scenario. If a news headline says that electric

cars are outselling gas-operated cars, a plausibility structure made up of the awareness of increased production of electric cars, efforts to reduce carbon emissions, and advances in battery technology makes the headline plausible even if it is surprising. *Yeah, I can see that*, you think to yourself. The statement is plausible in today's world because there is a scaffolding around it. That would not have been the case fifty years ago.

I propose that there are also "credibility structures"—networks of relationships or sets of experiences that make a statement credible because of the people who believe it. If a plausibility structure is about a statement being possible, a credibility structure is about a source being reliable. A credibility structure has to do with trustworthiness.

Let's try an example of a credibility structure. If a friend tells you that Taylor Swift is secretly recording again, and your friend is connected to a network of Swifties who are in the know, and you have a long personal relationship of trust and reliability with your friend and know her to be an honest and intelligent person, you are likely to believe her—and the Swifties she's connected to. The scaffolding of relationship and experience is the credibility structure around her and her claim.

All belief relies on scaffolding. But not all scaffolding is reliable.

Think of a tower of Jenga blocks. Each plank represents people or events or details of your story or context that have made faith plausible—your parents loved each other and

created a loving home, and they taught you about the love of God in Christ Jesus; your friends found an anchor during turbulent teen years by reading their Bibles and going to youth events; your church created a community of people in similar life stages or with similar challenges who helped each other recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in daily life.

But then your parents get a divorce; your friend deconverts; your pastor has an affair. One Jenga block after another gets pulled from the stack. And soon, the tower of faith comes tumbling down. Faith feels harder and harder to maintain. It all seems less plausible. That is the impact of plausibility structures.

Barna's research affirms this trend. Among those who were raised Christian and have left the faith (which is the story of about 12 percent of US adults today), seven in ten say things like "I have simply let go of the core religious beliefs I held as a child," "My childhood faith has not helped me as an adult," and "I have a hard time trusting religious institutions."[3]

In America—and certainly in other parts of the world too—Christians are finding it harder to believe not simply because the content of faith is no longer plausible; but also *because the credibility structures have failed*. The statements of faith are hard enough to accept; the source of these statements—the church—is getting more difficult to trust. Scandals have rocked the Christian world from the Catholic Church to the megachurch, from Anglican priests to celebrity pastors. Christians have allowed themselves to be co-opted by

political parties and social movements. Bible verses have been clumsily thrown into cultural conversations with little attention to nuance or context.

Down goes another Jenga block.

Not only has Christianity become less *plausible* for the individual, but the parallel and overlapping reality is that Christians have become less *credible*.

Over the past few years, I, along with many others, have made the observation that *opposition* toward Christianity has tapered off into *indifference* toward Christianity. After 9-11, many were talking about how religion in general and Christianity in particular were beginning to be seen as irrelevant at best, dangerous at worst. But militant atheism gave way to indifferent agnosticism. *Christianity? Buddhism? Religion? Spirituality? Who knows what's true? Who cares?*

But we're beginning to see another shift. Indifference is shifting into outright distaste. It's not militant atheism or indifferent agnosticism, but rather dismissive cynicism. Not *who cares*, but rather *who needs this?*

Unlike the decline of credibility that Christians faced in recent decades, this loss of credibility is not because Christianity has been found wanting on logical or intellectual grounds. Christianity is losing credibility in the West because it has broken relational trust and fractured social bonds. Our world has less of an intellectual problem with faith and more of an emotional one.

But let me stop right here and clarify: I don't mean that pejoratively. So often, people speak of emotions as though they

are the lower or animal-like part of a human; as if the mind and its thoughts are lofty, but the heart and its feelings are fluffy, unserious, or unsubstantial.

I don't think of emotions that way. Human beings operate on the gut level far more than we'd care to admit. As New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has persuasively argued, we are not rational beings first, but feeling beings who rationalize our intuitions.[4] Or, if that bothers you, consider how Ashley Null, the leading living scholar on Thomas Cranmer, the great English Reformer, summed up Cranmer's view of human beings: "What the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies."[5]

So what we love, what we find desirable, matters.

Is it possible that today, the world around us finds Christianity unbelievable mostly because they find it unde sirable?

A DIFFERENT HERMENEUTIC

We don't need better *apologetics*, though I'm all for those. Christians in every age need to articulate the reasons for belief in their own way for their own day. We need a different kind of *hermeneutic*—a different way of making sense of the claims that Christians make. Commenting on the changes he was noticing in Britain in a post–World War II reality, Lesslie Newbigin, the missionary bishop to India, said as much. It's a long quote, so let's take it a few lines at a time.

> I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation.[6]

This is his central claim. It is the church who makes the gospel believable, the community of Christians who make Christianity credible.

> How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?
>
> I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.[7]

Newbigin is not diminishing the many other ways Christians engage in public life or live out the nature of the gospel as a "public truth"—an announcement and a reality that affects everybody, everywhere. He lists examples like "evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one." But he argues that "these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community."[8]

The believing community is the credibility structure that makes the gospel believable. Women and men who, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, "believe it and

live by it" make the good news believable. Christians—in the fullest sense of the word—make Christianity credible.

TYING A ROPE TO THE BARN

There's an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* where a blizzard arrives around Christmas. Pa mentions to his friend that they better put the "rope about to the barn." Now, I grew up in Malaysia, just outside the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. I don't know the first thing about barns or blizzards. But my father-in-law is a farmer in rural Iowa. A second-generation farmer, the son of a man who spent hard-earned money to acquire land and worked that land with horses in the early twentieth century, my father-in-law retained not only the ethic of the previous generation but also the romance of manual work. He resists GPS tractors and Roundup Ready beans. He wants to be around the cattle and the dirt himself.

The barn outside their house is worn down, the wood aged and brittle. It stands a mere fifty yards from the house. And yet, as my father-in-law explains, blizzards in the Midwest can get so brutal that even a short distance, traveled with frequency and familiarity, can be hazardous. The wind and snow can be blinding and disorienting, and a short jaunt to the barn to close it up can result in hours of wandering out in the cold. You need a rope between the house and the barn to keep you walking straight, to keep you from straying off in the blinding blizzard, to save you when stumbling on snow

drifts. You need a rope between the house and the barn just to make it home.

And so it is with us.

Christians have lost credibility because we have lost our way. We have given lip service to the formula of faith, but ignored the life it was meant to produce. We have our doctrines sorted, but our love is disordered. The result is a lived Christianity that falls short of the living faith of the church at its best.

The church has also lost credibility because it has mishandled power. Barna Group found that only 18 percent of non-Christians say Christians are good at listening to others' stories and standing up against wrongdoings and injustice. Instead, about a third of non-Christians agree strongly that Christians "see themselves as better than others" (34 percent).[9] We have raised our voices for the wrong things and at the wrong times. We have taken a stand when we should have taken a knee in prayer and in service. We have tried to rise up when we should have taken up our cross in sacrificial love. We believe in Jesus, but our lives look nothing like Him. This is not the kind of "believing community" Newbigin had in mind. This is not the kind of church that makes the gospel credible.

There is no shortcut to regaining credibility. There is no PR campaign or ad blitz that can cure what ails us. What we need is not a better reputation. What we need is a return to the core of who we are called to be. We need to come home.

We need a rope—a rope to hang on to, to guide us, to remind us where it all began. Maybe in years past the weather

was clearer; maybe there was less confusion. But now, in a swirl of cultural opposition and conflicting Christian opinions, we are blind and cold and in danger of getting lost.

How are we to find our way? Amid the flurry of opinions broadcasted on X (formerly Twitter), arguments expounded on blogs, winsome talks aired on podcasts, how are we to distinguish between *popularity* and *credibility*?

Our age is not unlike the early decades of the fourth century. Christianity had been multiplying rapidly for three hundred years with the number of Christians burgeoning from roughly a thousand to multiple millions. It grew beyond the margins as powerful people and influential teachers began to convert to Christianity. Yet popularity was not always accompanied by credibility. While many churches kept the apostles' teachings, some had been mixing it with pagan superstitions and philosophy. Traveling teachers were twisting core tenets of the faith, causing confusion. On top of that, as wealthy and powerful people became Christians, the Way of Jesus was at risk of corruption. These early Christian communities needed a rope to keep them tethered to Jesus and His kingdom; they needed a reminder of the Way.

The threat of false teaching was present even in the New Testament era, as the letters of the apostles reveal. A simple summary of the heart of the Christian faith was essential. A compact, single-sentence version of this is in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: "Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures."

But more needed to be said. In the century after the New Testament era, a few Christian teachers developed an outline of the faith that every follower of Jesus could trace. In the early AD 300s, a council of more than three hundred church leaders gathered to settle disputes and to affirm the teaching of the apostles. What emerged was a robust "rule of faith."

The Council of Nicaea codified the core Christian confession and confirmed the letters and books that counted as Christian Scripture. Both creed and canon came from this monumental gathering. Though the Creed was expanded slightly and refined at a later gathering in Constantinople in AD 381, it is still referred to as the Nicene Creed and is affirmed and confessed in worship by Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians all over the world. Because of its historical and global significance—and for the sake of brevity—we will simply refer to it as the Creed.

In the chapters that follow, we're going to walk line by line through the words of the Creed, one of the oldest confessions of Christian faith. As we unpack each line, we will explore what it means to be a Christian. But we won't stop there. We're going to examine what it means to believe these words and what it looks like to live like we believe these words. By the time we get to the end of this book, it will be clear that a definition is not the goal. Faith is not an end in itself; faith must work itself out in love (Gal. 5:6). We are not simply on a quest for truth. We are finding our *way*—the way of Jesus and His kingdom.

And for that, we're going to need a rope to lead us home.

CHAPTER 2

What's in the Bag?

Several years ago when our two older kids were going through kindergarten, each of them in turn played a game called What's in the Bag? Each child in the class would take turns bringing in a brown paper bag with a secret item in it, and the first letter of the item written on the outside of the bag. The child would also write a simple poem, giving clues for the hidden item. For one of our kids, we put something in the bag and wrote the letter *O* on the outside. The clue was straightforward prose: "It's a color and a food." One classmate shouted, "An Oreo!" To his great disappointment, it was, of course, an orange.

What's in the Bag? is sort of like the game people play when trying to answer the question of what it means to be a Christian. The clues vary, sometimes from church to church,

because the contents of the bag seem to change as people keep adding stuff.

Oh, to be a Christian, you need to vote with the conservative party or the progressive party.

And you can't watch those kinds of movies or TV shows.

And you may not want to put your kids in public school.

You've got to put God first and then country—that is, America.

You've got to embrace freedom of all kinds—but especially as it relates to guns and markets.

Cultural values, behavioral norms, personal preferences, and more get lumped in with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit until no one is quite sure what really is in the bag.

And so people don't know what they are saying yes to.

They like some of what's in the bag, but they've been told it's a package deal. Take it all—the holy doctrine and the human dogma, the beautiful gospel and the obnoxious behaviors—or nothing.

And so, they opt for nothing. They walk away. Keep your bag, they say. Like the rich young ruler, they walk away sad, but not because of anything Jesus said and not because they were unwilling to surrender their whole lives to the true King, but because they can't say yes to the bag they've been given. The Christianity they have been invited into is untenable and undesirable. You see, it isn't just that culture has shifted or that not many are asking the question to which we claim to have the answer; it's that Christians have lost their way. We no longer know what lies at the center of our faith.

What's in the bag? It's anyone's guess.

IS IT CHRISTIANITY?

In the early 2000s, a sociologist named Christian Smith conducted a survey of America's religious youth. He found teenagers who self-identified as believing in God and having a faith of some kind. He then asked follow-up questions to see what they actually believed about this God. The survey addressed the distinction between what British theologian Helen Cameron called "operant theology" and "espoused theology." Operant theology is the implicit theology by which people live, the set of values and convictions about God that guide their decisions and shape their perspectives, even if those values and convictions are unarticulated or subconscious.

Smith found that the operant theology of young people who claimed to be Christians was a far cry from Christianity. In fact, it was so unlike Christianity that he needed a new name for it. He came up with the phrase *moralistic therapeutic deism*.[1]

Moralistic because God is concerned, above all else, with how I behave, and whether I'm following His arbitrary code. Don't be naughty; be nice. Don't smoke, don't chew, don't hang out with those who do, and so on.

Therapeutic because God really wants me to feel good about myself and about my life. Yes, He has rules and stuff, but in the end, He just wants me to have a good time and for

things to go well for me. God is a way for me to feel better about life.

Deism because this God doesn't really get too personal. He is detached, distant, and for the most part, uninvolved.

In short, the young Christians that Smith surveyed believed in a God who is far away, who wants us to do good, and who wants us to feel good.

A few years ago, when I wrote *The Resilient Pastor*, many Christians were becoming aware of a new corruption to the Christian faith, a version of Christian nationalism that insisted God was responsible for America's history, central to America's identity, and invested in America's destiny. Some have, over the years, referred to this tendency as a kind of civil religion—a public version of ideology and morality that loosely connects to Jesus or relies on Jesus-y language but really serves as bonds of solidarity for society. (One possible root for the word *religion* is literally the things that bind or tie us together.) Jesus is confessed for the sake of unifying or preserving or reclaiming "America," itself a reference to more than a geopolitical nation-state and more broadly to an idea or an ideal.

Initially, much ink was spilled on how Christians have ruined politics by this pursuit. Subsequent analysis has questioned whether people who hold this view may actually be confessional Christians—*What is their creed or belief?*—or practicing Christians—*Do they participate in the life of a local church?* But the outcome is that the name of Christ has been slandered to the wider world.

While the church has drifted into problematic expressions of Christianity like moral therapeutic deism and Christian nationalism, the wider culture has become more individualistic. And that's an important part of understanding Christianity's credibility problem today. In trying to describe the landscape of a post-Christendom world, I have used the metaphor of a shift in tectonic plates, resulting in a surge of oceanic waters that has left us with a messy aftermath. As the connection between Christianity and culture became more tenuous, the rise of alternate meaning-making systems of spirituality created a culture awash with confusing and conflicting values and beliefs. But if there were a way to distill the overlapping qualities of the dominant way of seeing the world, I would propose we call it something like *individualistic syncretistic pluralism*.

Sociologist Jean Twenge, who has studied the trademarks and tendencies of all six living generations from the "Silents" to the "Polars" or Gen Alpha, reports that "Millennials are the least religious generation of younger adults in American history." It remains a possibility that Gen Z will surpass millennials in their abandonment of organized religion. But why is it that religion is on the decline among millennials? Twenge's answer: "In short, because it is not compatible with individualism—and individualism is Millennials' core value above all else. Individualism promotes focusing on the self and finding your own way, and religion by definition promotes focusing on things larger than the self and following certain rules."[2]

CREDO

The word *credible* is related to the word *creed*. Both are about belief. To be credible is to be believable. To have a creed is to have something to believe in. What I am proposing here is that the church's original confession of belief is what can help us become believable.

As Newbigin said, it is a church that believes and lives the gospel that makes the gospel believable. If the Nicene Creed is the rope that leads us home and reminds us who we are and if being who we are called to be makes the gospel believable to the world, then we might say it like this: believing and living the Creed can make a Christian credible. It keeps us from adding things to the bag. It is a purifier, an irreducible minimum of the Christian faith.

But this creed is much more than that. It is meant to hold our feet to the fire, to lift our heads up higher, reminding us how life-altering this kind of faith really ought to be. Creed and credibility are related because when Christians return to the essence of our faith, we reclaim its power. That doesn't mean culture and structures don't matter or that we can live a kind of decontextualized version of Christianity. No, that's not possible. The Word became flesh, and faith in the Word is always enfleshed again and again in real human beings and real human communities. The church will look and feel different all around the world. But the Creed reminds us of the core and invites us to live from it.

The Nicene Creed is a rule of faith. Maybe you've heard

of a "rule of life," a pattern of spiritual disciplines that helps us to be with Jesus and to become like Him. A rule of faith is an essential complementary component of Christian discipleship. If a rule of life helps us to keep company with Jesus in the course of daily life, a rule of faith keeps us on the path; it keeps us close to the heart of our faith. The Creed functions in at least three ways. Let's name them and try a few metaphors.

First, it is an *outline of theology.* The Creed was an early, official, robust outline of apostolic faith. I know, I know . . . some of you might protest that theology is not the answer. You're thinking, *Maybe* you *care about such things, but I don't care about theology. Who needs theology? I just love Jesus, and He loves me.* There is something truly beautiful about that heart. It is childlike and simple and gets the very core of the gospel: being loved by God and loving Him in return. We ought never to lose that heart, never to lose the simplicity of childlike faith.

And yet, we are to grow to a mature faith. For our bodies to grow, we need proper nutrition. If someone were to prepare a nutritious meal for you—let's say, salmon with black pepper, spinach, and tomatoes—you would benefit from it, even if you did not know why. You don't need to be a nutritionist to benefit from a nutritious meal. But if you want to learn to cook for yourself and develop a habit of healthy eating and healthy living, you have to learn a few principles of nutrition.

Theology is a bit like that. Good theology—from authors or preachers or podcast pontificators—can nourish your faith

without you understanding why. But if you want to begin to grow and feed yourself, you have to learn a little bit about what makes a particular theology good or bad, robust or anemic. Our faith cannot grow on the theological equivalent of a Happy Meal.

All of us have a theology; the only question is whether it's a good one or a bad one. Everybody has a way of thinking about God. That's what Christian Smith's survey of America's youth showed. Everybody has a view of God, a way of thinking about Him, and a way of understanding how He thinks about us. The question is, are we thinking rightly or, to be more precise, thinking Christianly or not? That's what the Creed helps us grapple with.

When children learn to write, they don't start with an empty page. They usually begin by tracing their letters over dotted lines. Over and over again, they trace a letter. One whole line of the letter *A*; one whole line of *B*. Soon, they can write those letters without the guidance of the dotted lines.

That's the idea of a pattern of faith. You trace these words until you know them by heart. Until they find a way inside your core, until your vision of God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; until your picture of love is Christ who came down "for us and for our salvation"; until your ultimate hope is "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

If the Nicene Creed were only an outline of Christian theology, you might be tempted to put this book down. Save it for another day when you want to study or stretch your brain. The truth is, the Creed is so much more.

It is also an *instrument of unity*. The Creed is sharp enough to exclude, yet strong enough to unify. Phrases in the Creed are clear enough to mark the difference between those who are Christians and those who aren't.

The sharpness of the Creed and the distinction it creates should not alarm us. It is not intended to make us hostile or belligerent toward others. It isn't a means for us to elevate ourselves above "outsiders" and look down our noses at them. None of us deserves the grace that has been given to us. The church, those who have believed this news and received this gift, exists in the world for the sake of the world, not to stand over or escape from the world. But for the church to be given "for the life of the world," as Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann put it, the church must stand apart from the world in some sense.

Schmemann wrote that Christian worship—the liturgy—begins as a "real separation from the world."[3] Having ascended in worship and having been "immersed in the new life of the Kingdom," Christians are able to return to the world with faces reflecting the "light, the 'joy and peace' of that Kingdom" and to be its true witnesses.[4] The separation from the world is the first liturgical act; the sending back into the world is its last.

But for the church to be given for the life of the world, the world must also be able to see where we stand together. As noted earlier, the Creed is sharp enough to exclude, but it is also strong enough to unify. The church is like a wagon wheel. The spokes of the wheel are like the different streams of the

body of Christ. The more you follow the spokes away from the center, the farther they get from one another. Every stream of the body of Christ has a special perspective or emphasis. Most of the time, these unique angles are gifts to the wider church.

My family is a microcosm of this. My mum was raised Anglican, and for many years, when my sister and I were young, we attended an Anglican church. The beauty of the prayer book and the awe of participating in the liturgy—the standing and kneeling, the candles and the incense—provoked a reverence that I remain grateful for. When faith for my parents became something they began to fully surrender to, they had the experience of becoming "born again," of allowing Jesus to become Lord and Savior of their lives. A friend invited them to join a Bible study led by a Baptist pastor, where a love for the Word of God was instilled in them.

Later, in separate experiences, both my dad and my mum came to know the presence and power of the Holy Spirit filling their lives in notable ways. Eventually, our family began attending a Pentecostal church. The passion for the lost and the conviction that God would meet us personally and powerfully in prayer and in worship left an indelible mark on our lives.

And so it is that each stream of the church brings different gifts to the wider body of Christ. Our various emphases can be good, but a point of distinction can easily become a point of division. The more we focus on how different we are, the farther we get from one another.

But the more we follow the spokes toward the center,

the closer they get to one another. When the church moves toward our shared center, our unity gains visibility. And what is at the center? What unites us? What can we all hold on to? The Creed reminds us: It is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's why the Creed can be an instrument of unity.

Finally, the Creed is a *guide in uncertainty*. I have only hiked one "fourteener" in my whole life (a "fourteener" is what mountain people call a mountain whose peak is 14,000 feet or more above sea level). I did it the summer that I moved to Colorado, mostly because I didn't know any better. A group of people was about to hike Pikes Peak, and I decided to go along. I mean, how hard could it be? Well, let me tell you! The trail itself is about thirteen miles, but the change of elevation that occurs over those thirteen miles is the killer. You gain over 7,500 feet in elevation with about 3,000 feet of that gained in the first three miles! All in all, it took me about seven and a half hours.

I was grateful to have been accompanied by a large group from our church. One nice guy carried my backpack for me, and another guy sat with me when I needed a break every thirty minutes during the final three miles of the climb. But you know what really made it possible? Not just that others were going with me, but that others had gone before me. I was not the first person on the Barr Trail to Pikes Peak, and I'm glad I wasn't! There was a trail, a well-maintained and clearly marked trail because many others had done this before. Someone had cleared away the thicket and brush and trod

down the weeds. Someone had laid markers and built a camp about two-thirds of the way up. There are even websites with pictures and advice for a successful ascent.

The Creed is like a trail. Someone has walked this path, they have marked the pitfalls, cleared away the obstructions, and even set up a camp at a strategic place. The early fathers fought through errors, cut down heresies, and made a clear path for how to think and talk about and pray to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The stanzas about Jesus are longer—sort of like Barr Camp on the trail to Pikes Peak—helping us stop and reflect more deeply, keeping us from critical mistakes about the Son of God.

Many of the phrases in the Creed are included precisely to avoid specific heresies and to keep Christians on the only path to the summit. Yes, we have to walk the trail for ourselves; but no, we need not walk it by ourselves. And, bless God, there is a trail!

CREDIBLE FAITH

The next ten chapters will take the lines of the Nicene Creed and help us do more than understand them. The goal is not mere theological formation, though that is of some benefit. My hope is to encounter the God the Creed reveals and, in doing so, discover who He calls us—indeed empowers us—to be as we are immersed in His life.

The Creed is organized in three "articles" or sections—one

for each person of the Trinity. The section on Jesus is appropriately the longest because, as the early Christians knew, if you get Jesus wrong, the whole thing falls apart. Tucked into the section on the Holy Spirit are some pretty powerful lines about the church, about the forgiveness of sins, and about the hope of bodily resurrection.

With that in mind, here's how we're going to map out our journey. We'll take a chapter to examine the weight of the first three words of the Creed, words that get repeated in each of the three sections. Then we'll spend one chapter on the first Person of the Trinity—the source of everything. After that, we'll take three chapters to talk about Jesus. Next, we will spend a chapter on the Life-Giver, the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter, we'll talk about the church—yeah, I know, a really complicated topic. Then we'll unpack baptism and forgiveness and how revolutionary the good news is meant to be. And finally, we will lift our eyes to the horizon of hope, further than what we're used to seeing—beyond heaven.

But credibility is not just about the right confession. All along the way, we will ask what it would look like to really live like we believe these things. So in the last chapter of the book, we'll pull some of those threads together and sketch out a vision of a life that says "Amen" to the words of faith. We will take seriously what the apostle Paul wrote: "The greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). The list he was referring to was faith, hope, and love. Having covered faith and hope, we'll hear the divine invitation to a life of love. For the Christian, the proof of *right belief* is supposed to be *true love*.

Each of the three articles—actually, the songwriter in me prefers to think of them as "stanzas"—begins with the same three words. Like a good hymn, the Creed opens with a repeated refrain: "We believe in . . ." It's those three words that we go to next.