

# We believe

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

Every Sunday, millions of Christians recite either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed. The first evolved over several centuries and first appears in the writings of St. Ambrose in 390 c.e.; the second was formalized by 318 bishops assembled to battle the Arian heresy at the Council of Nicea in 325. Some of us sleepwalk through the exercise of saying the creed, thinking of other things. Others puzzle over the creed's strange language or find offense in what it seems to say. Moderns who find these and other creeds boring or dated have antecedents in Anabaptist and other free-church traditions which, 500 years ago, decided that a fixed structure of belief was less desirable than a good heart and an open mind. Creeds, these traditions assume, close minds and harden hearts.

"Perhaps few fully appreciate what a remarkable thing they are doing," writes Luke Timothy Johnson, a Catholic theologian teaching New Testament at Candler School of Theology (United Methodist) in Atlanta. "The creed does more than declare what Christians believe. It challenges those who recite [it] week by week to live as though that which they recite is true." Johnson prefers the Apostles' to the Nicene Creed because it says what needs to be said without losing itself in confusing philosophical constructs that turn off postmoderns. "I have grown in my appreciation of how important it is for the church to have a communal sense of identity," he says, "and how hard that is to come by without something like a creed."

Like many Catholic and non-Catholic Christians, Johnson memorized the creed as a child. But he was slow to appreciate what it is and what it does for contemporary believers. Life experience, broader reading and a growing awareness of the deeply confused state of many of today's faithful led him to abandon his earlier prejudices and write this creed-affirming book, primarily addressed to those Catholics and non-Catholics "who still stumble through [the creed] as an act of piety because the church tells them to." Johnson affirms the value of the creed as a defining faith symbol, as well as a unifying act of worship with a broad ecumenical consensus. Almost paradoxically, he speaks of the creed as both a definer of clear boundaries and as an inclusive standard.

For all his careful historical and liturgical scholarship, Johnson is surprisingly flexible when it comes to accepting certain creedal variables. "The church is a large stumbling block to faith," he says. "A case in point is the 'filioque' clause, proclaimed at the Council of Toledo in 589 c.e. There, and subsequently, the Western church declared that the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father 'and the Son.'" This innovation was not at all acceptable to Eastern Orthodoxy. It was a major factor in the breakdown of relations between Latin- and Greek-speaking Christians during the following centuries. The church in the West made "filioque" official without consulting with or winning the approval of the Eastern churches. The latter never accepted this addition, and it became a point of contention (along with church polity issues) that ultimately led to the 11th-century split between Eastern and Western Christendom. Johnson comments that this is the kind of theological micro-speculation that gives creeds a bad name.

This readable book aims to help both those with and without an extensive theological education to engage the creed more passionately. Johnson writes for people who say the creed but do not understand it and therefore do not grasp what a radical and offensive act they engage in at worship. "I want to make the creed more controversial (and counter-cultural) rather than less . . . for the right . . . rather than the wrong reasons," he says. He is well aware of the standard arguments, ancient and modern, against the potentially divisive appearance of doctrinal statements in general and the ecumenical creeds in particular. The book challenges these by focusing on congregational life and dealing with both the intellectual and experiential dynamics of creedal worship.

While seeker services eschew most classic Christian symbols, creedal worship values and affirms them. These images and meanings register subliminally and, over time, provide both individuals and their communities with belief-awareness and self-definition.

Ultimately, this book is not so much a theological history of the comparative development of two creeds as a defense of their contemporary celebrative value in the worshipping community. The Creed carefully and accessibly engages theological truths. It convincingly argues that communal and personal faith is enhanced through consistent liturgical discipline.