

4-1-1983

Toward a personal credo

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Toward a Personal Credo

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of Requirements for the Master
of Religious Education (MRE) de-
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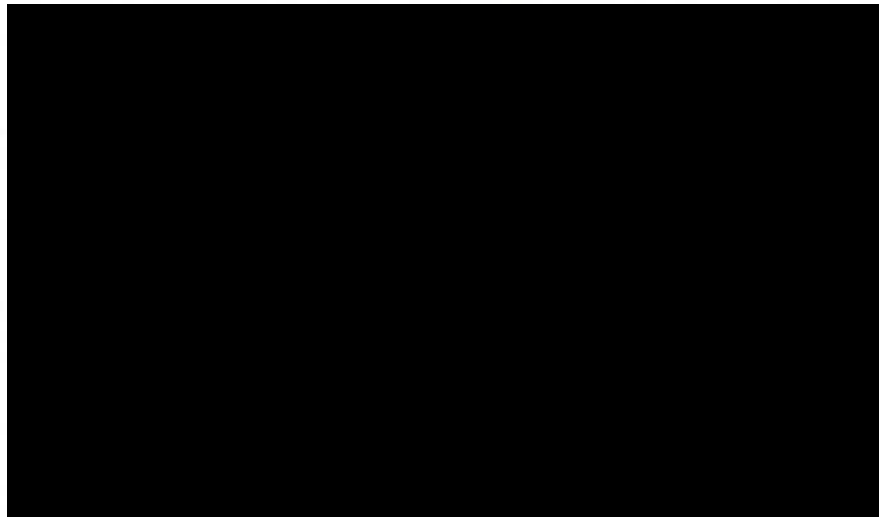
Submitted By

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April 21, 1983

Date

Interdenominational Theological Center
Atlanta, Georgia

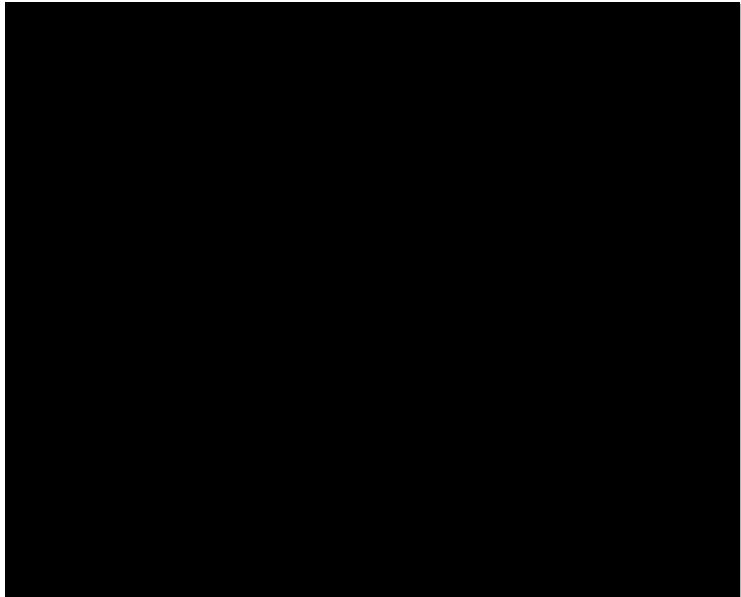


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TOWARD A PERSONAL CREDO

Submitted By

Brenda Diann Brooks



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I. INTRODUCTION

Circumstance and Motivation. I stand at another threshold of my life's journey.

Several years ago, I switched gears, pulled up stakes and finally took an unlikely, "road less taken", that I had by passed years before and ended up in seminary.

It has not been a dull few years. I have met many people, both here and abroad, and in the course of an education I have learned many things about theology -- both good and puzzling. Importantly, I began to really know God and Brenda a little better. Soon, I hope to graduate.

At times like this, at passages from one period of life, one vocation or situation into another, it is appropriate, helpful and in this case, required, to make some sort of assessment of what I believe by way of reflection. This particular reflection will be theological in nature and creedal in form.

It is both personal and official. This exercise is surely appropriate to my change in situation, but it will also serve as the outline for my official affirmation of faith to be delivered to my Presbytery in accordance with the requirements for ordination in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

Creeds inform and form orthodoxy. In this case, my

statements reflect the fruit of my formal study of orthodoxy and my personal response to only a few issues and concepts as I head into the turbulence of theology in action--namely ministry in the Church. A personal credo, like the great creeds and confessions of the Church, outline and lift for affirmation issues which define faith.

By means of a credo, I hope to mirror my theological self as I pass from formal to informal classroom, measuring my untried understandings against the theology and orthodoxy of the Church, assess my gaps and mapping desired progress.

The ultimate authority for what I believe is Scripture -- both Old and New Testaments. No matter the literal validity of its stories or their particular cultural origin and bias, I believe that the witness of Scripture can and does affirm the nature and intention of God. I believe that at the same time, Scripture confirms the relationship between God and human beings.

Scripture is a human document full of spiritual and theological insight. It is not, however, easily understood nor clear. Its interpretation is not universal among the faithful.

Despite this, I believe that Scripture is surely inspired by God and is the normative body of revelation held in common by the church and the faithful. Scripture and not tradition or personal revelation defines orthodoxy. I believe it

is the ultimate counsel for my behavior and my belief.

But, although normative and universal, I do not hold that Scripture is the sole source for revelation. Personal experience is also revelatory and the tradition of the Church can often be the corporate expression of personal or corporate revelation.

And finally let me say, I belong to a credal fellowship as a Presbyterian and so a credo or statement of faith is integral to my religious tradition. My tradition is also reformed and as such I can add a famous disclaimer: reforma semper reformata meaning reformed over reforming.

God's Word and love are unchanging. However, the rebellious nature of women and men coupled with our changing understandings of processes demand that God and the Word be repeatedly proclaimed and re-applied to a changing world which turns its back on the Kingdom and the promise of Shalom.

We are called to understand and interpret again the promises and messages of Yahweh. We are called again and again to see and live the life of a betrayed and broken Christ in a world which consumes itself with greed and injustice.

In the dimming light of that world, we are forced to rethink and reconsider the life, light and mission of the Church and change our lives and responses to living. Our

responses must then change with changing circumstance. This is the cry of reforma semper reformata.

Therefore what I say today is not immutable. What I say today has not even been buffeted by hard experience nor adverse circumstance -- not much. Thus, what I say today must, I pray, change with my own further growth.

Confessions, creeds, this credo even, are merely guides and histories. The Holy Spirit only, breathes life into and speaks finally and forever through Scripture for me.

Thus, in reflection, with respect and appreciation due to my instructors, in consideration of my personal experience of God and governed by Scripture, I intend to theologize by means of credo.

The following concepts are to be explored: God - as Creator, Redeemer and Advocate; and the Church as a universal and relative fellowship; the mission of the Church in terms of its proclamation of the Gospel and service, worship of God, the efficacy of preaching; the sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper; and the Kingdom beyond history.

II. GOD

First and foremost, I believe in God: God as Creator, Redeemer and Advocate.

I believe that God is without measurable limit and ultimately unfathomable. God in Spirit is present among us and beyond creation and its creatures. God is always the initiator, in that through grace, God has loved us first and unreservedly as seen through the sacrificial death of Jesus the Redeemer.

Furthermore, by means of Scripture and other witnesses, we are assured of God's faithfulness to us and that God can be trusted in all that has been promised. But let me be more specific by talking about God as Creator, Redeemer and Advocate.

A. God the Creator. I believe in God as Creator of everything. In molding life into the likeness of God, male and female beings were made and meant, I believe, to represent two distinct but equal and harmonious aspects of God's being. God then, is neither solely male as the bulk of scriptural and church language might infer, nor solely female as I might wish. God is both female and male and yet neither.

Any less harmonious, less balanced interpretation of the female and male creature brings the perfect symmetry of God's essence into question. Any interpretation of God's creation that glorifies one side of God's essence over the other, that puts one side in domination over the other, or that brings either likeness female or male, above the other, is contrary to God's spirit and will.

B. God the Redeemer. The intention of God the Almighty has always been to reconcile that relationship between Creator and Created, severed by human self-centered disobedience. The initial breach is symbolized in the sin of Eve and Adam, but the intention of God -- the promise of reconciliation -- also originates with these first human beings in the promise that the seed of the woman would someday triumph over evil.

The promise of reconciliation through redemption is repeated over and over through-out the Scriptures. This promise was received by Noah, Abraham, Sarah, David, the prophets, and a multitude of witnesses culminating in the birth, life and death of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus Christ is both God's Word of revelation and work of revelation in that he is the human manifestation of God therefore he is the long expected Christ. The Christ Emmanuel is God with us in human history and the fulfillment of God's intention for the reconciliation of human creation.

Jesus Christ is God incarnate and so through Jesus' death, God in fact purchased or better redeemed the human creatures who sold out to the forces of evil, represented by the Serpent of the Garden, just as the slain Paschal lamb represented a sacrifice for the sins of Israel.

Just so, God's promise of reconciliation and the forgiveness of sin was accomplished at last and forever

through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the person of Jesus, God incarnate God redeems the creature from eternal loss through eternal love.

C. God the Advocate. Just as the creature can take no credit for creation, the creature cannot of its own right and volition restore the relationship between the Creator and the Created. In fact, the creature is unable to maintain of itself the life required of the restored or redeemed. For that reason, I believe that God has provided counsel, nurture and help through the person or entity of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the agent of God and yet an entity in and of itself having been with God and having functioned with motivating power from the bright beginning. Human language prefers to confine this entity in human gender, usually male. However the Greek word is actually a neuter word with personality and so I claim, with understandable bias, the gender of female.

The Holy Spirit is the essential agent, thought and inspiration of God. The Spirit is as breath, in that she gives and nurtures faithful life. The Spirit is as mediator, who was sent also by Jesus, in that it intercedes and presents the need of the supplicant to God and conveys the requirements of God to the redeemed sinner. The Spirit is as counselor in that she renews, affirms guides and supports.

It has been mentioned that the Spirit moved with power at the Beginning. This fact asserts the independent motivating nature of the Spirit not only of and from God, but with God and as God as well. Spirit then, is both aspect of God and entity, just as Jesus is of God and human.

In all, fellowship and communication (or communion) with the Holy Spirit, conveys the dynamic creative activity of God the Creator and the love and grace of Jesus the Redeemer into the midst of the present age and into the lives of those who are faithful. With the coming of the other Advocate, the Church of Jesus Christ was created and in the Spirit, the Church lives.

III. THE CHURCH OF GOD

I believe that the universal church is a fellowship of people of every nation, together with their children. They are set apart by their acceptance of Jesus as Christ the Redeemer standing advised and disciplined by God's grace.

In response to God's unmerited favor, in grace, this fellowship of believers worships its Creator in praise and supplication. Furthermore, it becomes the responsibility and privilege of each believer to participate in the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ, so that through prayer, study, and work, the inner life of the individual and community is built, maintained and strengthened.

This ministry is not only to the community of believers but to others outside the community through loving service. The Holy Spirit enables and inspires the Church in its work, service and worship according to the rich gifts she bestows to each believer. The Spirit breathes life into Scripture and into the proclamation and hearing of the Word.

A. The Nature of the Church. While the Church is universal, encompassing people of many nations, cultures, classes and colors, yet in its ordering and worship the Church reflects, not only its union in Christ and union as a community, but also the various languages, traditions and diversities within the Church. There is therefore, no one way and no one tradition which can hope to speak adequately to or of God. There is no one

liturgy or theology which can speak to the universal Church.

B. The Mission and Work of the Church. The mission and work of the Church is the ministry of Jesus to both believers and non-believers alike, done through the inspiration and auspices of the Holy Spirit, through the human effort of layperson and clergy persons. Fundamental to the mission of the Church is the proclamation of and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and worship of God.

The good news or gospel of Christ is that the covenant of the Creator with a chosen people is offered to all people and that we have been restored to right relationship with a God who has sought us. The gospel of reconciliation promises: healing, justice, sholom (deep peace) and hesed (unmerited grace and love). This is the message that Jesus left for the Church to preach and live, so that all who do so may be known as his disciples (John 13) and that others might come into the community.

The work of the church is its worship of God and through its worship God is glorified and given honor. Our human praise however, is inadequate to God's greatness and often inadequate to our own joy at Yahweh mercies and love for us. But the Church worships nevertheless through liturgy and improvisation.

The shelter, nature and healing of God's people, both the unbeliever and believer, is the work of the Church

commissioned by Jesus before his ascension again into God's presence. We are both rich in Spirit and made rich in goods and gifts out of God's abundance which we are to share. This stewardship of lives and substance which we have only a momentary claim, is indicative of our surrender to the claims of redemption and accomplished in the belief that God's whole creation is ours through kinship with Jesus and our relation to the Almighty.

The mission of the Church is the preservation of truth. We are conservators, as individuals and as a body, of Christ's revelation of God as faithful, unreserved love. The Holy Spirit persuades us to believe and accept that truth and excites in us the need to perpetuate that truth through testimony and orthodoxy. Even so, such truth, couched in human beings and our institutions, is relative, being refined and reformed by the Spirit, until the truth is again revealed in its fullness of God for those who remain faithful.

I believe that God sent Jesus to bring the Kingdom of Shalom and Love to the faithful. This Christ did. The Church is to exhibit that Kingdom in its work and mission, in its attitude and living. We are called to see Christ living among us and love him in each bruised and thirsty man and woman we encounter. Any other response is Christ's crucifixion relived, rather than his resurrection celebrated.

1. **Preaching.** The proclamation of God's intent toward us through redemption and Spirit is required by Scripture and

by our individual and corporate gratitude. It is a human activity directed at best, by and toward the Divine. Even in the hands and from the mouth of the easily deluded human being, God can and often does speak to us, for which we can be grateful and blessed for Jesus is indeed present.

The sermon is a conversation with God most appropriately couched within the setting of worship where a dialogue may take place between worshippers and the Almighty. The heart of preaching is the Divine concern for our lives as witnessed in and interpreted from Scripture and personal testimony. Its goal is continued, faithful living by believers through their conviction and conversion, in their systematic enlightenment and through their healing and encouragement.

Preaching is ministry but only one of many ministries. Preaching styles vary, but the color, gender or language of the preacher are not the issue or concern of God's message through Jesus. The call to preach, however, is a gift often recognized and validated by the Church through ordination, but just as often not. Further, the ability to preach is also a gift, but one that can and should be strengthened by prayer and disciplined by formal and informal study -of many kinds, not the least of which is the study of Scripture and homiletics.

2. The Sacraments. I believe that in the sacraments, Jesus Christ is present and with the Church. His ministry of salvation is continued and the assistance and presence of

the Spirit is acknowledged and made known. Through the sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper, we are brought into the fellowship of believers and remember the act of God's grace that gathers us as one. The sacraments are an integral part of the corporate worship of God and are essential to the worship dialogue with the Almighty.

I believe that Baptism is the sign of entry into the Church and an act of consecration to the new life in Christ. By baptism, we are called to respond to God's act of steadfast love through Jesus. By baptism, we are accepted into a family of believers who affirm, protect and nurture each other.

Baptism is not earned nor deserved, but accepted graciously in childlike faith by those who have come to believe. Children of believers are to be baptized because they too, are heir to God's covenant of grace, with the goal and intent of parents and congregation being that the child, once baptized may be nurtured toward a personal confirmation of faith at some later date.

Baptism is a mystery, an act of the whole Church, a part of the worship, and done in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Advocate. It is an act of God and our response to God's action toward us and is administered only once in life since our failure to do God's will can never negate God's initiative toward us.

Since it is not earned nor deserved, the Baptism of one

of the Body is the occasion of both celebration and prayer. Celebration, in that it is a new beginning of a life given to Christ and to the ministry of believers. Prayer, in that each and all present may recall the grace of God for their life, reaffirming their faith in God's promises and their responses to God and each other in love.

I believe that the Lord's Supper is an act of spiritual nourishment: an outward sign of an inward grace made available by God, commanded by the Christ for the real and inner benefit of believers and their offspring. This Meal is taken in memory and as a reminder of Christ's obedient sacrifice for us for our reconciliation with God. I believe that this sacrament witnesses to the power of God to fulfill the covenant made with the chosen and God's selfless faithfulness to all. Therefore, the Lord's Supper is more than a reminder and memorial, it is also a demonstration of God's present and real power here among us now.

Through this Communion, we are made one with Christ's real and symbolized Body: the bread of the Church. I believe the Lord's Supper to be an integral part of the worship dialogue and appropriate to any Lord's Day or worship occasion. Brought together in thanks, praise, confession and thanks again, we are called to feed, satisfy and recommit ourselves to service and worship. Always unworthy we can ask why, but in the end, only accept Christ's invitation to be reminded, enriched and empowered by Love made flesh and blood.

3. Service. The Service of the Church is its many ministries to itself and beyond into the community. Ministry can be defined as any act of love which nurtures, both physically and spiritually and that can be seen in the selfless light of Christ's gospel. Traditional ministries include preaching, teaching, and charity, but beyond these are the ministries of healing and counsel, of feeding and self-development, which encompass for me the full scope of human need, suffering and justice, and also glorify God in heaven.

IV. THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEYOND HISTORY

I have been specifically asked to speak upon the Kingdom of God beyond the pale. My admission in this matter will fly in the face of conventional wisdom (i.e. "don't admit any uncertainty; any unorthodoxy") or at least, admit a gap or flaw in my theology. Nevertheless, believe that the Kingdom of God is not so much beyond, than it is here and now. I believe that the Kingdom of God can be now and is now, only when I personally remain one with Christ and therefore with God. Our response to Christ's message becomes the clearest manifestation or glorification of God in a new creation through new creatures.

It is my contention that the gospel of Christ and the mission of the Church point to and maintain not an ideal but the reality of such a present Kingdom of Love. The relationship made wrong by alienating creatures is made right and good again by creatures newly re-made, reconciled and again one with their Maker.

In other words, I have no future eschatology, I do not quite buy into a Kingdom of God beyond. The "hereafter", the "other side", and "heaven yonder" actually mean little to me now. I am not impressed by revelations of eschatological doom or bliss for the backslider or the believer.

The future is the redeemed now. Perhaps, it is my youth and/or relative lack of exposure to death, dying and the new vision of those who have more deeply felt the hot breath of death, that keeps the issue of a future Kingdom at a distance

from me. For whatever reason this gap in my theology, I will not condescend to spout the party or denominational line just to impress. The orthodoxy itself does not matter for this paper's deadline. Time will eventually help create and inform this theology as well. Reforma semper reformata.

A POSTSCRIPT

The creeds of the Church are definitive, designed and written by theologians, systematically trained and seasoned by lives devoted to academia if not faith. My credo in contrast reveals a less than definitive complete understanding of theology. In fact, I have even dared to reveal uncertainty for issues that have otherwise shaped and shaken the Church. In truth, there was not enough space to do justice to a full blown credo, nor did I invest enough time, perhaps but certainly I do not have enough knowledge. Mea culpa.

I am not, at the end of four years, a finished theologian or the ultimate pastor if there is such a beast. And the truth is that I am in many ways less impressive a student as well. In ending, I am just beginning.

When I remember this paper, I will remember those last youthful righteous struggles to accommodate the whims and strictures of the rest of the world. Faced with, new data and alien principles in the Black Church, and its personalities, I have tried to preserve my hard won autonomy and style. I have not failed but I've a long way to go yet.

Style, when set in cement becomes cult, becomes convention, becomes system and liturgy. My personal struggle here at ITC has been very similar to the discomfort of the Church with new perspectives and new vision, while attempting to maintain a justified, yet shaky status quo.

Like my Church, I too, am reformed, ever reforming and I struggle on.