

Handling Theology

In essentials, unity

In non-essentials, liberty

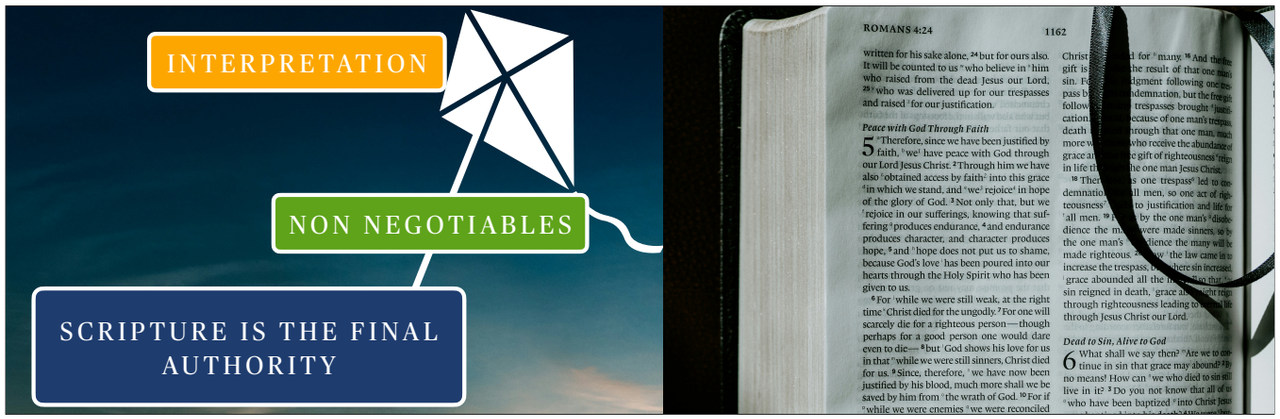
In all things, charity.

Reminder of the Unity of the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1-6

1 I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: 4 there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

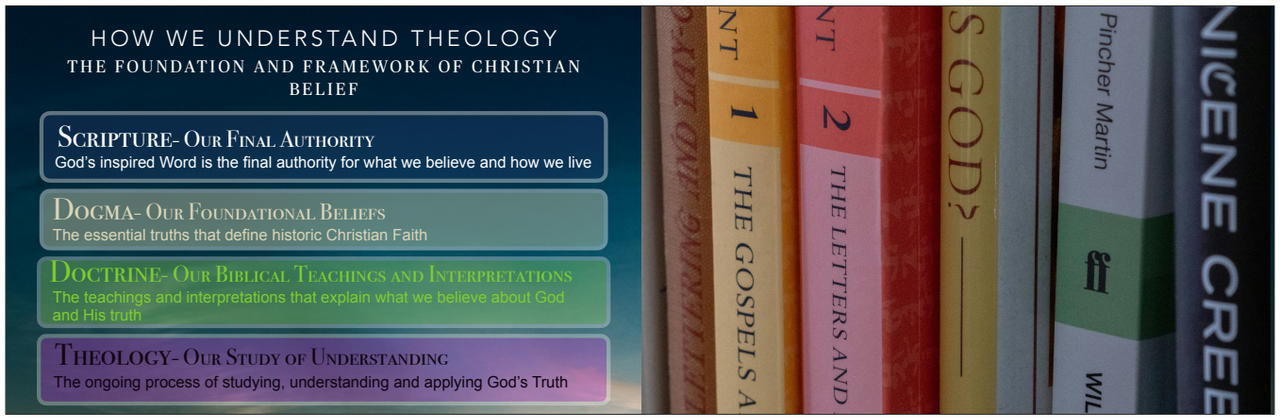
WE ARE SUBMITTED TO AN AUTHORITY HIGHER THAN OUR PERSONAL OPINIONS.



Our first faith statement is that Scripture is the final authority with regard to our faith

It is appropriate to interpret Scripture, and those interpretations are where we get different doctrines and denominations. But those interpretations or theorizing, much like a kite, need to be tethered to the final authority; they must have a string, or a structure of non-negotiable beliefs about God, that guard the interpretations of Scripture so we don't interpret ourselves out of truth

The non-negotiables are what we will call Dogma
So what is that, and how do we come to it?



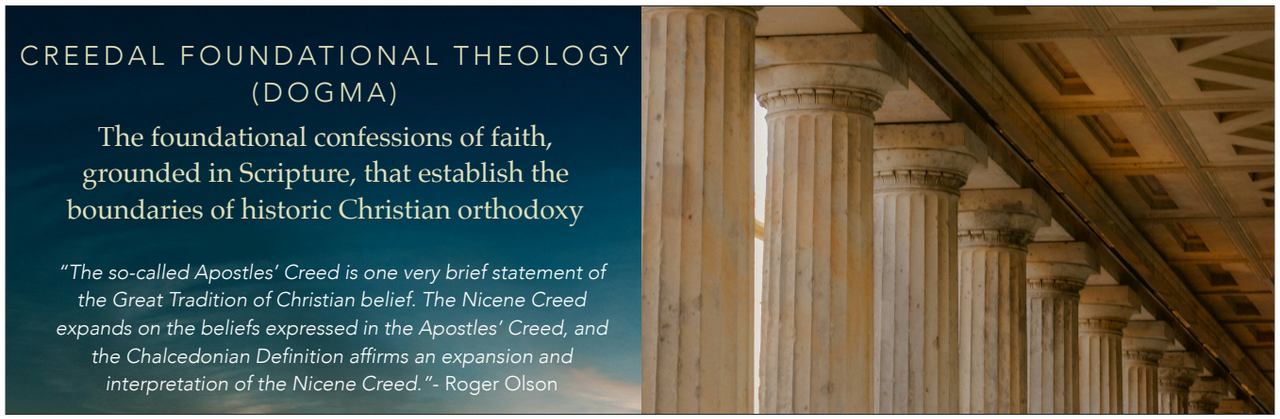
How We Understand Theology
The Foundation and Framework of Christian Belief

Scripture- Our Final Authority- God's inspired word is the final authority for what we believe and how we live
- So we are clear: Scripture remains the final authority; the challenge is how Scripture is interpreted. To simply say, "the Bible says," still requires a lens to protect from an interpretation quoting Scripture but changing its truth.

Dogma- Our Foundational Beliefs- The essential truths that define historic Christian faith
- These are the non-negotiables of what our faith consists of: who God is, the Trinity, Salvation, the incarnation, Jesus' death and resurrection. These are belief statements, not interpretive ones.

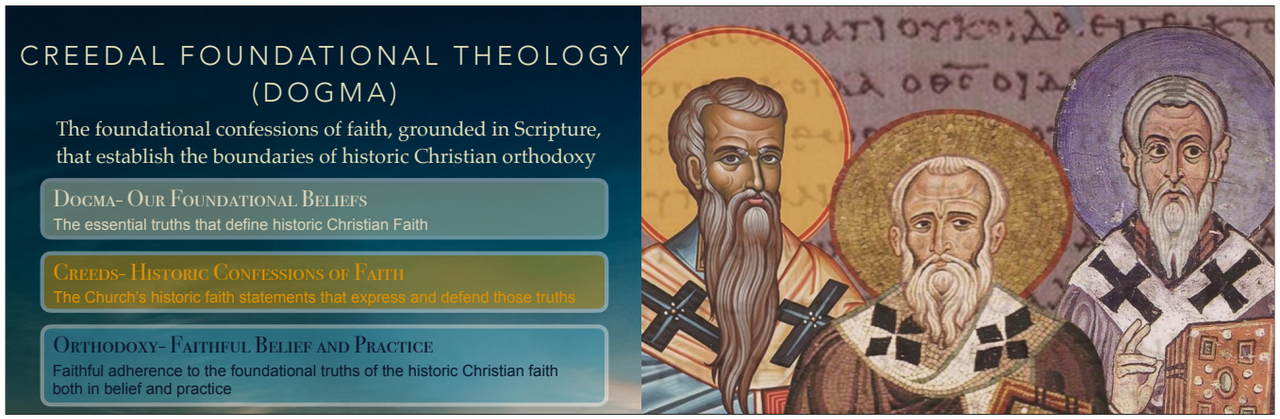
Doctrine- Our biblical teachings and interpretations- the teachings and interpretations that explain what we believe about God and His truth
- This can vary in interpretation but not depart from dogma, redefining the faith. Birth place of denominations and factions within the body of Christ
- In this we can disagree but remain united in dogma

Theology- Our study of understanding- the ongoing process of studying, understanding and applying God's truth
- Theology is a valid endeavor for growth and understanding, but should not be used as a means of division



Creedal Foundational Theology (Dogma)-The foundational confessions of faith, grounded in Scripture, that establish the boundaries of historic Christian orthodoxy Scripture is the final authority; dogma is expressed through the creeds, which are historic confessions that identify and affirm the essential mysteries of the faith and set boundaries for faithful biblical interpretation and theological pursuits.

"The so-called Apostles' Creed is one very brief statement of the Great Tradition of Christian belief. The Nicene Creed expands on the beliefs expressed in the Apostles' Creed, and the Chalcedonian Definition affirms an expansion and interpretation of the Nicene Creed."
Olson, Roger E.. The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity (p. 38). (Function). Kindle Edition.

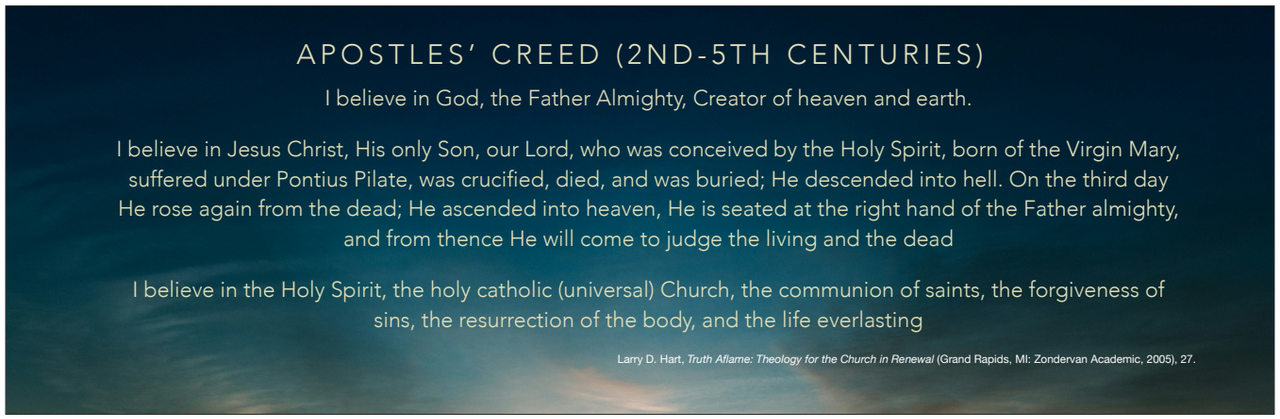


Dogma- Our foundational beliefs- the essential truths that define historic Christian faith

Creeds- Historic Confessions of Faith- The church's historical faith statements that express and defend those truths
- In a sense the creeds are the vehicle for dogma, our non-negotiables

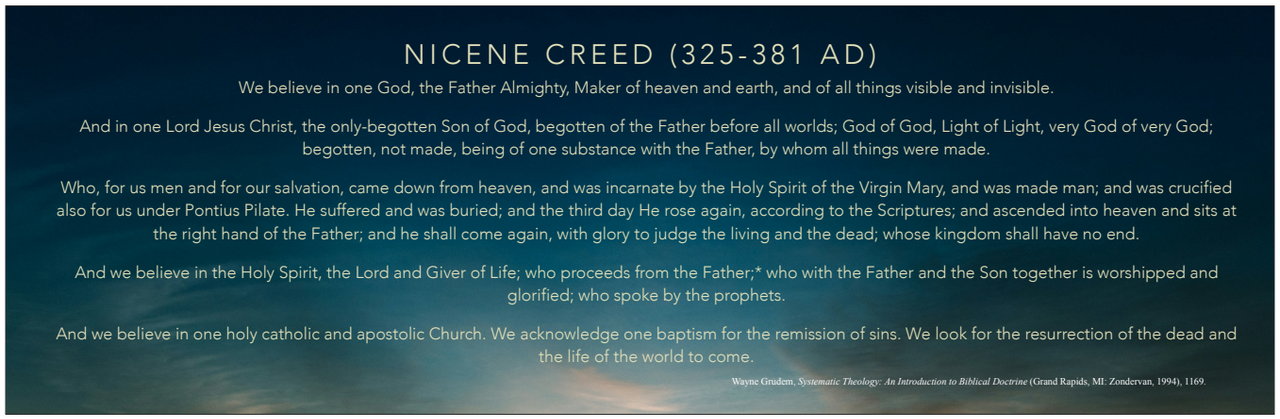
Orthodoxy- Faithful belief and practice- Faithful adherence to the foundational truths of the historic Christian faith in both belief and practice
- Ultimately, historical Christian faith calls us to both faithful belief and faithful practice (James 2:17, Rom 12:1-2, Titus 2:1)

We don't just believe what is true but we live faithfully in accordance to what we believe.



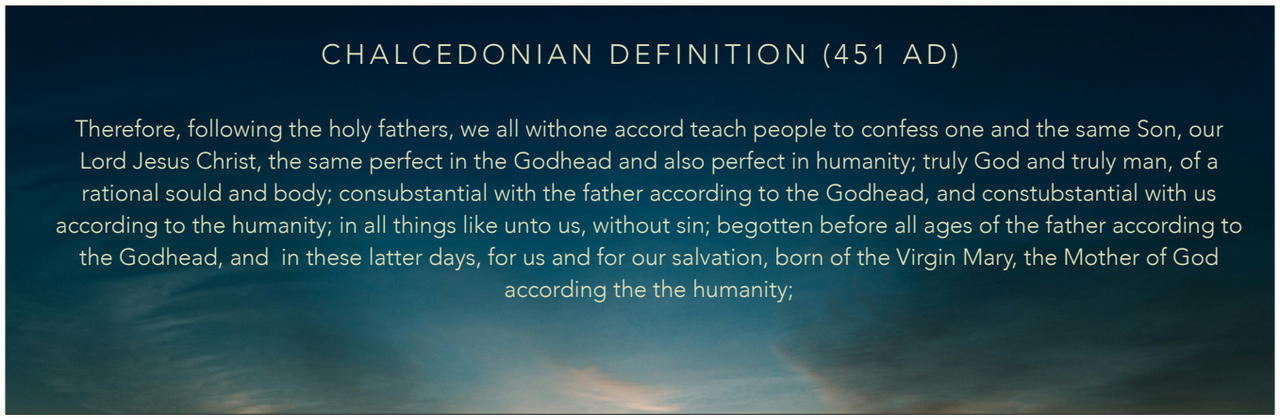
Apostles' Creed- 2nd-5th Centuries
I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of the Father almighty, and from thence He will come to judge the living and the dead
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic (universal) Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting
Larry D. Hart, *Truth Aflame: Theology for the Church in Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2005), 27.

1. Apostles' Creed — 2nd–5th centuries
Historical background
The Apostles' Creed developed from early baptismal statements of faith used in the Church, particularly the Old Roman Creed (around the 2nd century). It was not written by the twelve apostles, but reflects the apostolic teaching passed down through the early Church. Its familiar form developed over several centuries, reaching something close to its present wording by the 5th–6th centuries.
Purpose: To summarize the foundational beliefs of Christianity, particularly the Trinity, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of eternal life.



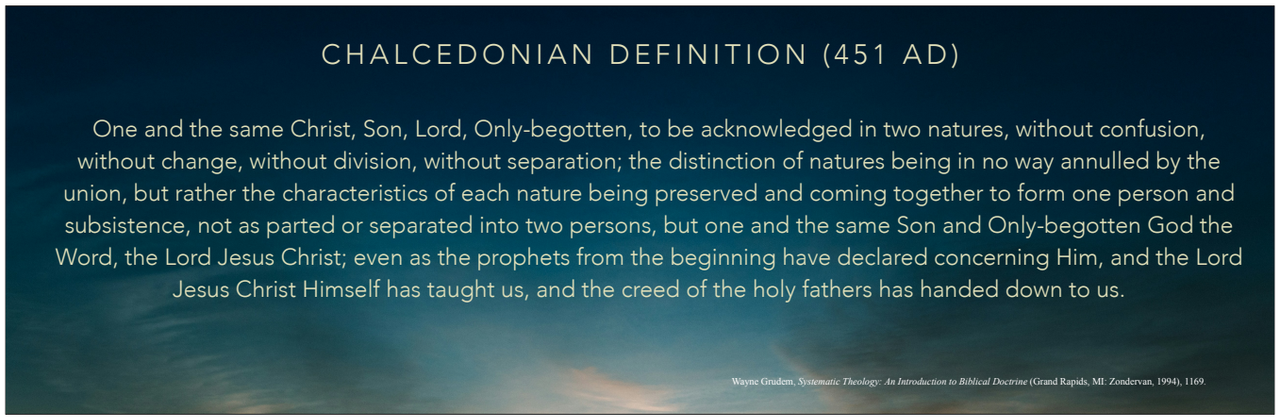
Nicene Creed (325-381 AD)
We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.
Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.
And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father;* who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.
And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.
Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1169.

2. Nicene Creed — AD 325 / 381
Historical background
The original Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 in response to Arianism, which denied that the Son was fully and eternally God. The creed affirmed that the Son is of the same divine essence (homoousios) as the Father. It was expanded and brought to its familiar form at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.
Purpose: To affirm the full divinity of Jesus Christ and clarify the Church's confession of the Trinity.
* “*and the Son”* left out for further discussion at a later date due to the rift between East and West in 1054



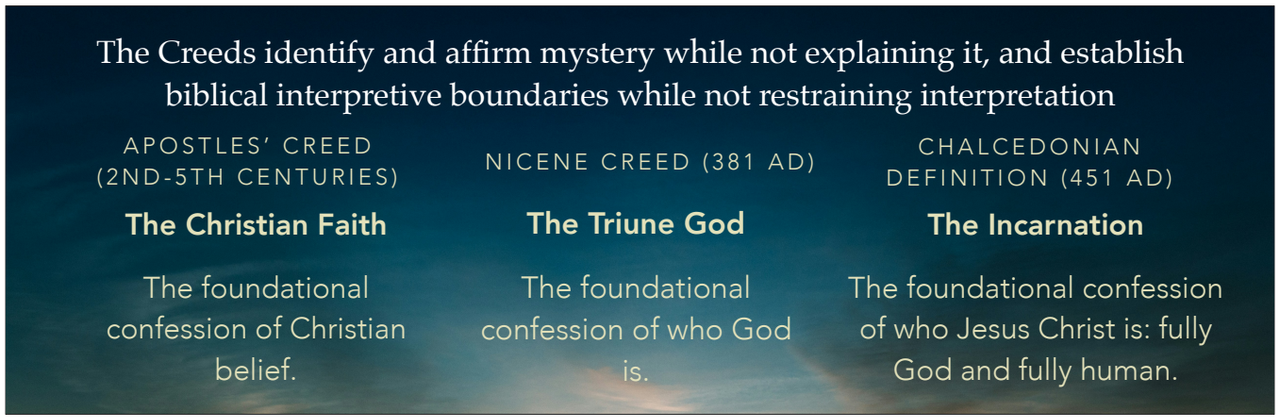
Chalcedonian Definition (451 ad)

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all withone accord teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in the Godhead and also perfect in humanity; truly God and truly man, of a rational sould and body; consubstantial with the father according to the Godhead, and constubstantial with us according to the humanity; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according the the humanity;



Chalcedonian Definition (451 ad)
One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us.
Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1169.

3. Chalcedonian Definition — AD 451
Historical background
The Chalcedonian Definition was established at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. It addressed disputes about the nature of Jesus Christ, particularly how His divinity and humanity relate to one another. It confessed that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, fully God and fully human, without confusion, change, division, or separation.
Purpose: To establish the historic Christian confession of the person of Jesus Christ and protect both His full divinity and full humanity.
Famous Four fences of faith statements about the incarnation
Without Confusion- The divine and human natures are not mixed into some sort of third kind of nature
Without Change-The divine nature does not become human, and the human nature does not become divine
Without Division- Christ is not split into two persons
Without Separation- two natures in one person. Christ identifies what we call the hypostatic union: Jesus is fully God and fully human…a mystery that can be explored, perhaps explained, but can never explain itself outside of “without separation…”



The Creeds identify and affirm mystery while not explaining it, and establish biblical interpretive boundaries while not restraining interpretation

- Creedal theology identifies those mysteries deemed essential to the Christian faith and expressed through its foundational confessions, without attempteing to exhaustively define or explain every mystery of God
- The creeds establish the boundaries of historic Christian orthodoxy while allowing diverse scriptural interpretations within the great Christian traditions. They protect against interpretations that depart fomr the foundational confessions and the historic Christian consensus
- The great traditions require us to receive certain foundational truths by faith, while allowing diversity in how we interpret and understand Scripture. However, our interpretations must never lead us outside the boundaries of the great confessions- the essential mysteries confessed by the historic Christian faith.
- These are foundational statements of faith, not conclusions reached through human reason alone. They confess truths that reason may explore and illuminate, but cannot fully comprehend.
- The creeds function like a fence around a playground: within the fence, there is freedom to explore, question, interpret, and develop a theological understanding and expression. The fence does not restrict exploration; it protects the space in which faithful exploration can take place.

The Apostles Creed

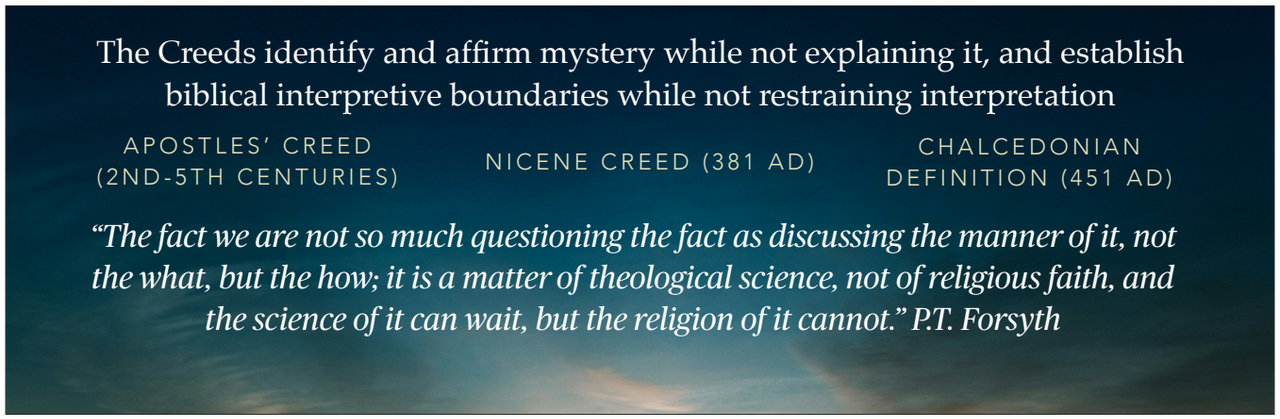
The Christian Faith- The foundational confession of Christian belief.

The Nicene Creed

The Triune God- The foundational confession of who God is.

Chalcedonian Definition

The Incarnation- The foundational confession of who Jesus Christ is: fully God and fully human.



The Creeds identify and affirm mystery while not explaining it, and establish biblical interpretive boundaries while not restraining interpretation

P.T. Forsyth reminds us of the difference between "religious faith" and "theological science," that is, *"The fact we are not so much questioning the fact as discussing the manner of it, not the what, but the how; it is a matter of theological science, not of religious faith, and the science of it can wait, but the religion of it cannot." P.T. Forsyth.* Peter Taylor Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ: The Congregational Union Lecture for 1909* (Cincinnati, NY: Jennings & Graham; Eaton and Mains) n.d., 294.