

On Indigenous Agency

# Towards Contextualized Creeds A Perspective from Buddhist Thailand

by *Larry Dinkins*

One of the first things our supervisor instructed us to do as church planters in Central Thailand was to glue a card with the Apostles' Creed into the cover of every hymnal. Every Sunday we would have our small congregation of mainly leprosy believers memorize the creed and recite it in unison. Our congregation had no real appreciation of the historic development and impact of this creed, but as preferred oral learners in a group culture, they enjoyed saying the creed out loud together and in the process gained a major dose of scriptural truth. Ancient statements of faith, like the Apostles' Creed, have been translated and used for centuries in a variety of cultures. Much ink has been spilt analyzing the contribution and content of the historic creeds, but less has been said about how to contextualize them for non-western contexts. To contextualize a creed, one must be aware of the nature of creeds historically as well as the benefits and potential pitfalls inherent in the development process.

## *The Value and Dangers of Creeds*

Philip Schaff in his massive three-volume work on Creeds states,

Confessions, in due subordination to the Bible, are of great value and use. They are summaries of the doctrines of the Bible, aids to its sound understanding, bonds of union among their professors, public standards and guards against false doctrine and practice.<sup>1</sup>

G. W. Bromiley notes the benefits, but also highlights the dangers of creedal statements:

The dangers of creed making are obvious. Creeds can become formal, complex, and abstract. They can be almost illimitably expanded. They can be superimposed on Scripture. Properly handled, however, they facilitate public confession, form a succinct basis for teaching, safeguard pure doctrine, and constitute an appropriate focus for the church's fellowship in faith.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout history, the majority of the church has supported the idea of creeds as a helpful way of bundling doctrine into a manageable corpus of memorable truth. The genius of a creed is that it can cover what is fundamental to the faith for all time, while at the same time address current issues of debate. Some resist creedal formulas as evidenced by the small but vocal minority of anti-creedal

---

*Larry Dinkins, Ph.D., has served with his wife Paula in Thailand for over 20 years with OMF International, beginning with church planting among leprosy patients. He subsequently served as Academic Dean of Bangkok Bible College and Seminary, as director of the Chiang Mai Theological Seminary, and has been involved with TEE training in Northern Thailand.*

factions in the church. They often view these ancient statements as simply “man made creeds” which add to the plain words of scripture. They especially object to denominational creeds that they feel are extra-biblical and detract from the sufficiency of the Bible. Some groups within “The Disciples” go so far as to state, “No head-quarters but heaven, no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no plea but the gospel, and no name but the divine.”<sup>3</sup>

This may seem extreme, yet an early Presbyterian missionary to Thailand encountered a national who might have expressed a similar sentiment as the Disciples:

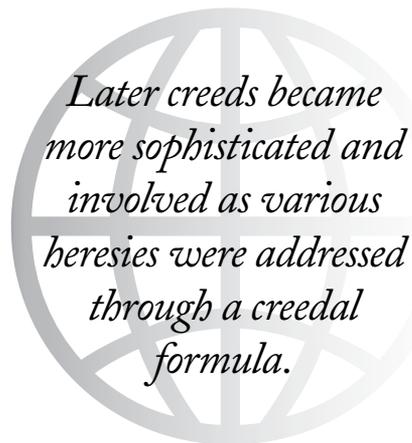
In May 1876, Nan Inta was ordained our first ruling elder. The story has oft been told that before his ordination the Westminster Confession of Faith was given him to read carefully, since he would be asked whether he subscribed to its doctrines. When he had finished the reading, he remarked that he saw nothing peculiar in its teachings. It was very much like what he had read in Paul's epistles!<sup>4</sup>

### Definition of Terms

In order to clarify the distinct characteristics of a creed, it is important to distinguish creeds from doctrinal statements, catechisms and confessions:

1. “A Creed is a concise, formal, and authorized statement of important points of Christian doctrine.”<sup>5</sup>
2. A doctrinal statement is a statement of doctrine made by a church or other religious institution, which quantifies precisely its core beliefs on certain issues.<sup>6</sup>
3. A Catechism is a confession of faith in the form of questions and answers to aid in the learning and discipleship process.
4. A Confession is a longer statement of faith, which has been painstakingly thought through by a denomination or similar church grouping to define what they believe the Bible to be saying.

Of the four, creeds are usually the shortest and begin with the familiar, “I believe...” This declarative format is well suited to a personal confession of individual faith recited in unison out loud in public. Doctrinal statements often begin with “We believe...” and are written in a formal literate manner with a stress on doctrine as well as supporting verses. Catechisms, like the Westminster Longer/Shorter Catechism, may cover the same subject matter as a doctrinal statement, but in an interrogative format. All four seek to summarize the cardinal doctrines



of the faith in such a way that they are more easily understood and digested. Creeds do this in a form more suited to public worship while catechisms are educational tools designed for the classroom or one-on-one discipleship. Doctrinal statements, along with their longer counterparts, the Confessions, are declarative statements of biblical orthodoxy and peculiarities of doctrine. Although diverse in purpose, the inspiration for all four can be traced back to their ancient source: the Biblical Creeds.

### Biblical Creeds

In one way it is not necessary to develop our own creeds since the scripture is full of pithy summaries of belief. The primal creed and core of the Old Testament mosaic system is summarized in the famous Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might” (Dt. 6:4-5 ESV). Some modern Jews still recite the Shema three times per day. These verses emphasize the oneness of the God and the exclusive worship of Adonai. Another such declaration from the prophets is found in 1 Kings 18:39, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord he is God.”

In the New Testament there are concise confessions of believers that have encountered Christ and expressed that belief in a memorable way (John 1:49; 6:68-69; Acts 8:36-37; 1 Cor. 8:6). The core of the gospel is expressed in a creedal form by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11, but even more succinctly in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4,

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 (ESV).

Possibly the best example of an early scriptural creed is found in 1 Timothy 3:16,

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory (ESV).

In this creed, the “mystery of godliness” is expressed in five key statements of Christology, which can be easily memorized and recited.

### Early Sayings within the Church

Although not a creed, the Easter expression of “Christ is risen” (Χριστος ανεστη) followed by the response of “He is risen indeed” (Αληθως ανεστη) is an early example of how believers affirmed the miracle of the resurrection in a responsive manner. These same phrases are used in hundreds of cultures on Easter every year. Later creeds became more sophisticated and involved as various heresies were addressed through a creedal formula. There are three creeds that have especially left a mark

on church history: The Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds.

### ***Apostles' Creed***

This anonymous "Creed of creeds" traces its longevity and universal appeal to its simple brevity and sequential story form. As with all the ancient creeds, the Apostles' Creed countered various heresies of that day that denied the cardinal teachings on the humanity and deity of Christ. It is inevitable that there would be notable omissions in a statement that is just over 100 words. The entire earthly ministry of Christ is left out as well as any reference to the Kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Nicene Creed***

This creed is much longer than the Apostles' Creed and stresses the deity of Christ more than its earlier counterpart. The book, "Christ, Creeds and Life" gives this summary:

The creed is the first official doctrinal statement of the Church and is the most ecumenical of all the creeds, being used by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and many Protestant Christians alike. It was originally written by a gathering of bishops in the city of Nicea (in Turkey) in 325...The bishops at Nicea affirmed that Jesus was homoousious (of the same substance) with the Father; his divine nature was the same as God's divine nature.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Athanasian Creed***

This creed is six times longer than the Apostles' Creed and contains 44 rhythmic lines, which are designed to be recited or sung as a part of worship. Three-fourths of these lines are dedicated to the nature of the trinity as a counter to ongoing heresies of that day. As a test of orthodoxy, there is a clear stress on salvation as being only for baptized believers who maintain proper beliefs.

### ***Creedal Statements and Buddhism***

The closest to a creedal statement within Buddhism would be the affirmation, "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take

***H***is desire was to reaffirm core biblical beliefs but at the same time address religious and cultural issues within the Thai context.

refuge in the Sangha." The three refuges is the formal point of entry for the lay devotee of Buddhism and is repeated in worship and in various ceremonies. By making this statement, a Buddhist is affirming the Buddha himself, his teaching and the monkhood that supports the teaching. However, to achieve nirvana one must do much more than simply take refuge in the Buddha. To become a Buddha oneself, the devotee must follow a very stringent road of discipline and self-denial. Due to this creedal tradition and the public recitation and chanting within Buddhism, a Buddhist background believer in Jesus

will be quite comfortable when expressing his or her faith in unison through indigenous creeds.

### ***A Contextualized Creed for the Thai***

John Davis saw the instructional and liturgical value of creeds and set about to develop a creed, which would resonate with Thai people from a Buddhist background. His desire was to reaffirm core biblical beliefs but at the same time address religious and cultural issues within the Thai context. Recognizing the Thai as preferred oral learners, he designed the creed to be

#### ***On Indigenous Agency: Contextualized Creeds***

*In the 1960's missionaries in Africa helped nurture an original creed among the Maasai people. Lamin Sanneh notes the special characteristics of a creed when placed in the hands of indigenous agents.*

"Instead of casting their creed in cognitive abstract terms of the seen and unseen, of Christ as eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, begotten not made, and so on, the Maasai spoke of a journey of faith in a God who out of love created the world and everyone, how they once knew the High God in darkness but now knew this God in the light...There is little sign in the African Creed, as there is, for example, in the Nicene Creed, of the words "smelling of the litigious lamp", of the scars of bitter theological strife, of rubbing in the noses of the vanquished, of haunting heresy...their creed resounds with gratitude and with their sense of God's honor. Their attention was focused strictly on God rather than on them or on anyone else. The whole point of their creed was not that it should be a study document for scholars but a testament of faith and devotion for believers." (*Disciples of All Nations*, p. 241-242)

#### ***The Maasai Creed***

*We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the Bible, that he would save the world and all nations and tribes.*

*We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.*

*We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.*

easily recited out loud by the congregation. Davis recognized the unifying factor of reciting orally as a group as well as the benefit it is to memory. A further hope is that oral expressions of faith as contained in contextualized creeds will serve as a stepping-stone to private prayer and other creative ways of worship.

The following translation of Davis' Thai creed is broken into ten "I believe" statements<sup>9</sup>:

I believe in God who is almighty and all-knowing, and who having *created the universe, saw that everything he had made was good. All things did not come into being on their own, nor did 'ignorance'<sup>10</sup> create them.*

I believe that all mankind has evil desires, is not righteous in thought, word and deed, and consequently is both disqualified from, and incapable of, entering paradise, because it is a holy place.

I believe that mankind has no hope in self-dependence. *Man is incapable of attaining sufficient merit to liberate himself and therefore, sowing what he reaps according to karma<sup>11</sup>, he must perish.*

I believe that God, who is full of compassion and mercy, initiated and prepared the way of solving man's problem by sending his Representative, Jesus Christ, into the world so that man may be delivered from hell.

I believe that Jesus Christ volunteered to come from heaven to be born of the Virgin Mary according to history, in order to be man's 'scapegoat'<sup>12</sup> by dying on the cross to receive the penalty due to man because of his sin.

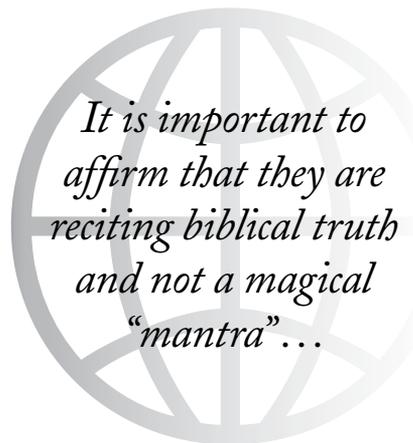
I believe Jesus Christ, who is truth and mercy, *is ready to offer his own abun-*

*dant merit* to whoever will confess and forsake their sin with sincerity.

I believe that *Jesus Christ has power over all people and all spirits in all ages* and has demonstrated his power over them openly by the cross.

I believe that only Jesus Christ has had victory over death through his resurrection, that he is now alive and is therefore able and ready to deliver mankind from the results of sin forever.

I believe Jesus Christ is the One who is to come according to prophecy to liberate all mankind. He will come a second time to establish his everlasting



kingdom on earth, which will be filled with justice and righteousness.

I believe whoever puts their trust in Christ becomes a member of His Church and is therefore responsible to be obedient to His teachings which are written in the Christian Scriptures, and that by so doing *he will not despise or destroy those beautiful parts of Thai culture which accord with Scripture.<sup>13</sup>*

### Considerations for Contextualized Creeds

The following are some basic guidelines and principles that should be

taken into consideration before constructing a contextualized creed:

1. Rather than stress a doctrinal treatise, it is helpful to construct the creed in more of a narrative sequence that can be easily followed in a "told" rather than formal literate fashion.
2. The Apostles' Creed at just over one hundred words is a manageable length for westerners to recite from memory. The Nicene Creed is three times longer and is usually read. Oral learners can memorize a longer creed than westerners, but each culture will need to determine an optimal length based on the particular purpose of the creed within the culture.<sup>14</sup>
3. A contextualized creed should address the key doctrines, worldview and heresies relevant to the culture.
4. The best chance for a widespread acceptance of a creed within a culture is for the national church to work together using qualified and respected leaders who will honor the time-tested biblical foundation of the historic creeds, while at the same time weaving in contemporary issues in a culturally appropriate manner.
5. Historically there usually has been a felt need or crisis that precipitated the writing of a creed. Such a situation cannot be manufactured by outsiders, but must spring naturally from within the church as it sees more of the necessity to define both what it is and what it is not to the surrounding culture.
6. Some oral cultures put great value in the oral expression of religious words. In such cultures, it is important to affirm that they are reciting biblical truth and not a magical "mantra" to gain favor from God or ward off evil.
7. Rather than seeking a solitary authorized creed, the church would be well served if a limited variety of credible creeds

### On Indigenous Agency: Conversion and Continuity

"The main thrust of African Christian scholarship has been the argument that 'conversion' to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity. In its specific application to Africa, the argument has meant that against all odds, space had to be made for a positive pre-Christian religious heritage in the African Christian consciousness on the grounds that 'religion informs the African's life in its totality'."

Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p.260

were made available. Different groups would then have the option of expressing their faith according to their own emphasis or style. This number would need to be restricted, however, since a proliferation of spurious creeds would only add to the confusion.

8. Some cultures may want to supplement the creed with biblical stories, indigenous music, native poetic forms, or pictorial presentations.
9. Just as Western creeds developed out of specific situations and crises, new creeds should be allowed to develop naturally rather than people feeling forced into making a creed simply because there is none.

### Conclusion

Just as ancient creeds arose out of a specific cultural context, so also will modern creeds need to adapt to the changing theological and cultural issues of our day. This adaptation should take place within the parameters of historic precedence and established doctrine. The insight provided by Western creeds of the past need to

be studied in detail and their unique contribution should be acknowledged and emulated, especially in their biblical emphasis. This knowledge coupled with cultural sensitivity will promote the creation of new creeds that can bless both the church and individuals for generations. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Schaff, Philip (1985) *The Creeds of Christendom*, Baker Book House Vol. 1, *The History of the Creeds* p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. 2nd edition, Walter A. Elwell (Ed.), Baker Book House Company, 2001 p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved September 23, 2009 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent\\_Christian\\_Churches/Churches\\_of\\_Christ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Independent_Christian_Churches/Churches_of_Christ)

<sup>4</sup> McGilvary, Daniel (1912) *A Half Century among the Siamese and Lao: An Autobiography*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1912, p. 169-170.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3d ed. 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved September 23, 2009 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrinal\\_statement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrinal_statement)

<sup>7</sup> Jesus mentions the Kingdom of God or heaven over one hundred times, a theme repeated in Acts and the epistles.

<sup>8</sup> *Christ, Creeds and Life*. Anne T. Thayer and Douglas Jacobsen (Ed.). United Church Press, 2007, p. 21

<sup>9</sup> Davis, John R. *Poles Apart: Contextualizing the Gospel*. Bangalore, Theological Book Trust, 1998, p. 146-149

<sup>10</sup> A Buddhist belief that since the world is chaotic and filled with suffering, the originator of such chaos must be "Ignorance."

<sup>11</sup> Sowing and reaping is a concept originated by God and must be differentiated from the Buddhist karmic system, which says that a person's destiny is determined by the sum of a person's positive and negative actions in this and previous states of existence.

<sup>12</sup> The *loy kratong* ceremony can be construed as a redemptive analogy akin to the scapegoat idea, since in this ceremony a small float is released into a river thus taking the person's "sins" away with it.

<sup>13</sup> The italicized portions of this creed highlight sections that specifically address Thai Buddhist sensibilities.

<sup>14</sup> It may be helpful for a church to have a longer confession, which can serve as the basis for a shorter creedal statement, which is drawn from the longer document. The shorter version would be suitable for use in worship, while the longer version could always be used for reference.

Not all education is created equal.

# Get Insight

**Insight** is a 1-year college level academic program of the USCWM that prepares future missionaries and World Christian leaders through intensive study of God's purposes in the world throughout history.

Students get a "big picture" overview of how God has been and is at work in the world, through an integrated, chronological program of independent study and group discussions. During Insight, students

have the freedom to wrestle with hard questions that arise from the Bible, history, philosophy, different worldviews, anthropology, world religions, and modern science. Insight offers an unparalleled intellectual foundation for students preparing for a future of international influence.

Insight is offered at several locations around the U.S., visit the website to learn more about each location.

[www.yearofinsight.org](http://www.yearofinsight.org) | [info@yearofinsight.org](mailto:info@yearofinsight.org) | 626-398-2472