

Early Creedal Formulations
and Theological Discourse:

Toward a Systematic Understanding
of Theology via the Creedal Process

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Mark A. Moore



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1312 17th Street • Suite 549
Denver, Colorado 80202

info@gcrr.org • gcrr.org

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To Kelli, Dylan, Beau, and all my family and friends.

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Introduction

Theology is a grand conversation, a dialogue with past voices and past ideas as well as a future ones. It is an open dialogue in which one may explore the depths and intricacies of God but it is also a structured dialogue, guided by God's own revelation in the Living Word and the Holy Scriptures. One has the freedom to explore the inexhaustible arena of theology, but not the freedom to assert whatever one wishes to be true about God while remaining faithful to the nature of God and God's interaction with the world as revealed through Jesus and Scripture. The grand dialogue of Christian theology is defined by certain essential identity markers, primary affirmations of the Christian story of God, which serve to give Christian theology its unique identity. Since the time of the Incarnation and the formation of the new community of God, the church has been identifying and attempting to articulate these essential identity markers, many of which are summarized and captured in the early creedal formulations of the Christian community.

These early creedal formulations, whether found in the New Testament itself or hammered out in later church councils, defined the essential claims of what Christians believed about God. In this way these early creedal statements stood as essential identity markers for Christian theology which guided the greater theological conversation. They were not intended to give final answers for the great questions about God, in effect ending the conversation. Rather, they were intended to guide the grand theological discourse of the church into a faithful articulation of the revelation of God.

John Howard Yoder notes that the creeds served as fenceposts defining the basic tenets of Christianity as found in Scripture. Yoder writes that the creeds are part of "the history to which God has chosen to lead his confused people toward perhaps at least a degree of understanding of certain dangers, certain things not to say if we are to remain faithful." Stanley Hauerwas suggests that Yoder is making the point that the "use of the creeds sets parameters beyond which faithful readings of Scripture will be unlikely."

Tertullian, writing on the Rule of Faith, which serves as a sort of protocreed during the early apostolic period, notes, "Provided the essence of

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the Rule is not disturbed, you may seek and discuss as much as you like. You may give full rein to your itching curiosity where any point seems unsettled and ambiguous or dark and obscure.” Here Tertullian highlights the vast freedom enjoyed within the parameters of the Rule. For Tertullian, the Rule did not serve as the final answer for all theological investigation but rather its proper measuring rod. Augustine defines the purpose of the creeds as nourishment for young believers:

The purpose of which [compilation] was, that individuals who are but beginners and sucklings among those who have been born again in Christ, and who have not yet been strengthened by most diligent and spiritual handling and understanding of the divine Scriptures, should be furnished with a summary, expressed in few words, of those matters of necessary belief which were subsequently to be explained to them in many words, as they made progress and rose to [the height of] divine doctrine, on the assured and steadfast basis of humility and charity.

Here Augustine notes that the creeds are summaries of the key elements of the Christian faith that should lead to more discussion and explanation as the person spiritually matures.

Karl Barth also stresses the guiding factor of early creeds and confessions of the church in terms of theological discourse. For Barth, the creeds order theological discourse and keep it faithful to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In his work *Credo*, an examination of the theology of the Apostles’ Creed, Barth asserts, “Instead of calling to order, Dogmatics has to be called to order and corrected by the church’s proclamation that has kept to better ways.”¹

Michael Bird, in his work *What Christians Ought to Believe*, stresses the importance of creedal statements in shaping and directing theological discourse as well. He states that in creeds, “you are saying: this is the stuff that really matters. You are declaring: this is where the boundaries of the faith need to be drawn. You are suggesting: this is what brings us together in one faith.”² Bird especially reemphasizes the importance of creeds for certain anti-creed strands of evangelicalism, noting that creeds are first and foremost biblical and carry on biblical traditions as well as defend the faith from heretical views.

¹ Karl Barth, *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 6. Throughout Barth uses the term dogmatics to refer to work of systematic theology.

² Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine through the Apostles’ Creed*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 18.

While theology is a grand conversation, it is also a series of smaller conversations, side discussions of specific doctrines. These smaller conversations are narrower in scope than the broad categories summarized in the creeds and explore the various subcategories of theology. While these smaller conversations are free and exploratory, they are also in need of guidance, guidance offered by the creedal process.

In this book, we will examine the function of early creedal formulations as essential identity markers in theological discourse with the goal of constructing an approach to the various subcategories of systematic theology that mirrors the creedal process. This approach, which I have termed the Essential Identity Markers model or simply EIM, seeks to identify and articulate the essential identity markers of a given theological subcategory, in order to define the proper parameters for theological discourse while still allowing such discourse to develop and expand within the articulated identity markers.

The Need for the Study

Nearly two millennia of Christian theology have given rise to numerous theological voices. In many ways, though, these voices have become too numerous and often appear contradictory. Augustine held a particular view of theology while Luther held another. Wesley opposed Calvin. Barth eluded both liberal and conservative viewpoints in some areas. While these voices have enriched the church's understanding of certain complexities of Christian theology, they have the potential of leaving the average student of theology or layperson in a haze of confusion, wondering what exactly Christians believe about anything. This confusion has led to what may be considered a form of Christian agnosticism. Many theological classes have become surveys of historical voices which often leave students questioning if anything can be truly known about theology.

The time has come to reinforce the essential claims of Christian theology, to define the parameters once again. The creedal process of identifying and articulating the essential claims of Christian theology serves as a guide for the EIM method of identifying and articulating the essential identity markers of each subcategory of theology. Following the creedal process in the EIM model allows the church to enter the grand conversation again and again from a place of agreement, a place of shared, common belief.

The EIM model can guide each new generation as it attempts to understand the handed-down proclamations of the church while also breaking new ground. Barth stressed the vital importance of holding theology and the creeds in dialogue for just this purpose: "Because the Church must again and again understand its Confession anew and because it

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is again and again confronted with the necessity of confessing anew, it requires Dogmatics alongside the Confession.”³ Each new generation should therefore engage in theological discourse that is guided by the essential identity markers of the Christian faith and yet be free to explore the vast area within.

Research Focus

The main focus of this book will examine how the creedal process of identifying and articulating essential identity markers of the Christian faith provides a model for approaching theology that properly defines these essential identity markers for any given category while also providing sufficient space for deeper theological discourse. Some sub questions that naturally arise from this research question are as follows:

1. What is the creedal process?
2. What factors influenced the formation of early creedal statements?
3. How did the early church leaders view the function of these statements?
4. How do essential identity markers influence theological discourse?
5. How does the creedal process influence teaching theology today?

Scope and Limitations

As this book examines the creedal process, it will focus its attention only on early creedal statements. These early creedal statements will include early creedal statements found in the New Testament, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Nicene Creed.⁴ Later creeds or denominational-specific confessions will not be examined.

Though the creedal process carries on throughout these later creeds and confessions, these earlier creeds highlight the church’s attempt to succinctly yet sufficiently define the essential identity markers of Christian theology during the earliest stages of theological discourse. These creeds and creed-like statements emerged in a setting where definition was imperative. As this book will note in the next chapter, the early creedal process was

³ Barth, *Credo*, 4.

⁴ In this book, the Nicene Creed will refer to the more complete Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381. Further research in this book will examine the full development of the Nicene Creed and will note the addition of the *et filioque* clause at the Council of Toledo in 589. Leo’s Tome and the Chalcedonian Creed are also clear examples of the function of creedal formulations as essential identity markers but have been excluded from this book to focus in on the creedal process of the first three centuries of the church.

shaped by an era of multiple voices and contradictory statements about the essential tenets of this new Christian faith. It was imperative for the early church fathers to clearly define just what Christian theology, or more importantly what Christian Scripture, was saying about the essential beliefs of Christianity.

This book is limited to these early creeds and creed-like statements because they possess the most unity in terms of support from the universal church. While there were battles and schisms even with these early creeds, they have emerged from history as excellent representations of the essential elements of traditional Christian thought. The Nicene Creed, in particular, is seen as the most unifying creed, as both the East and the West have cherished it and used it in liturgical services since its formation.⁵

While this book will focus on these early creeds and creedal statements, it will not attempt to assess the essential nature of each tenet of the creeds. Rather the focus will remain on the creedal process overall. It will attempt to fully define and examine the process that shaped the formation of the creeds as well as the function of the creeds themselves in theological discourse in order to assess if this process can provide an overarching approach to systematic theology.

Defining Key Terms

Creed

Based on the Latin word *credo* which means “I believe,” the term *creed* in this book will refer to a formulaic summary of essential beliefs, crafted and adopted as authoritative by the church. According to Philip Schaff, a creed is a “confession of faith for public use, or a form setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church.”⁶

The key words to note in this definition are *form* and *authority*. Creedal historian J. N. D. Kelly notes that a creed is “a fixed formula summarizing the essential articles of their religion and enjoying the sanction of ecclesiastical authority.”⁷ A creed has a certain form that identifies itself as a creed. This form also aids in summarizing the essential beliefs for the church to commit to memory. Creeds that have influenced theological discourse also carry with them the authority to do so.

⁵ Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Three Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green &, 1912), 32.

⁶ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1:4.

⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (New York: D. McKay, 1961), 1.

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Protocreed

The term protocreed will refer to shorter statements that function creeds but lack the scope and development of a formal creed. Many times, this term will be in reference to sayings in the New Testament that are usually short references to belief statements, whether originating with the New Testament writer or already in use by the early church.

Rule of Faith

This term was often used by the Ante-Nicene Fathers, like Irenaeus and Tertullian, to refer to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith that were handed down by the apostles. In many ways this Rule of Faith, or *regula fidei*, shaped the creedal process and contained the essential belief statements seen in the later formal creeds. This Rule of Faith stands as a bridge between the apostolic teaching and the creeds and canon.

Symbol

The term symbol was also used by the early church fathers in reference to the essential beliefs of the Christian faith. The term essentially means “mark” or “watchword” and highlights its function as a test for proper Christian belief. Schaff and Badcock agree that it can be used interchangeably with the term creed, as both serve the function of a test of orthodoxy.

Essential Identity Markers

The term essential identity markers or EIMs will be used to refer to primary affirmations of the biblical narrative. These EIMs are identified and articulated by the church through the process of theological inquiry. It is an assertion of this book that the creedal process was a process of identifying and articulating these EIMs. EIMs are what make Christian theology uniquely Christian. EIM will also be used to denote the model of approaching theology mirroring the creedal process developed in this book.

A Brief Overview of Literature

The multitude of books surrounding the topic of the creeds of Christianity can be put in to two categories: (1) historical surveys and (2) theologies of the creeds themselves. This literature review will survey several works relevant to this study by dividing them into these categories. Since this study covers the influence of these early Christian creeds on theological discourse,

it will also survey a third category of books that deal specifically with the topic of theological method and the purpose and function of theology. This review will begin with the historical surveys of the Christian creeds to provide an overview of the historical context of the creedal process.

Historical Surveys and Collections

In the late nineteenth century, Philip Schaff set out to provide a “symbolic library” that contained the creeds and confessions of the range of Christian denominations. The result was a robust four-volume set that stands as the most comprehensive collection of the creeds and confessions of Christendom.⁸

Particular to this study will be *Volume I – The History of the Creeds of Christendom*. In this first volume, Schaff begins by generally examining the definition and origins of creeds and then moves to more detailed studies of particular creeds beginning with the Apostles’ Creed and covering all the way to the confessions of modern evangelical denominations.⁹ For Schaff, the creeds and confessions of the church are “milestones and fingerboards in the history of Christian doctrine.”¹⁰ They represent the beliefs of each generation and the results of theological debates. This impressive collection is an extremely valuable resource for creedal studies.

In 1912, Edgar C. S. Gibson, the Lord Bishop of Gloucester, published an insightful, short work on what he considered the three core creeds of early Christendom: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.¹¹ For Gibson, similar to Schaff, these creeds emerged from the desire for faith to be expressed.¹² Gibson cites two reasons for the developments of the creed: 1) the need for “clearness and precision” in presenting the specific beliefs of the church and 2) the rise of false teaching.¹³

In 1930, F. J. Badcock sought to publish an updated work on creedal studies, especially on the origin of the Apostles’ Creed. Badcock, agreeing with Harnack, argued that the creed could not be traced back to the second century as others proposed, but rather emerges in its familiar form in

⁸ All references to Schaff’s work will come from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vols. I–IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).

⁹ Modern here means up to the close of 1876.

¹⁰ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. I, 4.

¹¹ Gibson’s focus on these three creeds highlights the importance of the creedal process that occurred in the first four centuries of the Christian faith.

¹² Gibson, *The Three Creeds*, 3. See also Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. I, 5.

¹³ Gibson, *Three Creeds*, 27.

the fourth century.¹⁴ Here Badcock separates the content from the earlier Rule of Faith and contemporary forms of the creed. One of the main contributions of Badcock's work is his detailed descriptions of the various types of creeds and confessions, a point that has been referenced in this work already.

In January 1935, Alan Richardson published a short introduction examining the early development of Christian creeds that exerted a great deal of influence on credal studies up to the last part of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Richardson's appeal was offering a scholarly work that was accessible. Richardson connects the formation of the early Christian creeds with the historical experiences of the first disciples and the risen Jesus. For Richardson, Christian doctrine emerged as a way to explain these mysterious experiences.¹⁶ In this work, Richardson traces the historical development of several key doctrines of the Christian tradition: the Trinity, the person of Christ, the Atonement, and the Holy Spirit.

In 1950, J. N. D. Kelly published what has emerged as the seminal work of the twentieth century in credal studies. This work, which represents over a decade of work Kelly did while part of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Oxford, surveys both the historical context of the creeds and the theology contained within the creeds.¹⁷ Kelly surveys credal elements in the New Testament up to the later renditions of the Apostles' Creed. Kelly's work still stands as the most authoritative work on these early creeds.

In 1960, Paul T. Fuhrman sought to reexamine the history and importance of the creeds, noting that the use of the creeds had slipped into mere formalism for many church denominations.¹⁸ Fuhrman purposed to introduce the "principal creeds," which the church had used throughout history to state and reaffirm its core beliefs.¹⁹ For Fuhrman, the creeds were not merely statements of belief but also acts of worship, of giving credit to a specific God: "When the early Christian said, *Credo in unum Deum*, he meant not so much, 'I believe that a God exists,' as, 'I trust in one God in

¹⁴ Badcock, *The History of the Creeds*, 2–4. See also Adolf Von Harnack, *The Apostles' Creed*, trans. Stewart Means, ed. T. Bailey Saunders (London: A. and C. Black, 1901). Badcock disagreed, though, with Harnack's view that the creeds were irrelevant to Christian practice.

¹⁵ Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making: A Short Introduction to the History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981).

¹⁶ Richardson, *Creeds in the Making*, 25.

¹⁷ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, v.

¹⁸ This point is drawn out from the preface written by Fuhrman's colleague at Columbia Theological Seminary, Thomas H. McDill. See also Fuhrmann, *An Introduction*, 9.

¹⁹ Fuhrman, *Creeds of the Church*, 11.

contrast to the many gods of paganism.”²⁰ This connection to worship is a valuable piece in understanding the function and purpose of the early creeds.

Another compilation of the existing creeds from the New Testament to the twentieth century was edited and published by John H. Leith in 1963.²¹ This compilation is more comprehensive in scope than Kelly’s work and is contained in a more accessible one volume compared to Schaff’s four-volume set. Leith focused on officially recognized creeds and confessions of church history but also sought to expose the reader to more obscure creeds. Leith notes that Christianity has always relied on creeds to express its beliefs because as a religion Christianity is driven by its theology.²² Here Leith underscores the interplay of the credal process and theology, which serves as a foundational element of this study.

In 1963, Vernon H. Neufeld added to the field of credal studies by closely examining the earliest of the Christian confessions found in the New Testament.²³ Neufeld traces the *homologia* of early Christian tradition as it emerged from Judaism.²⁴ Neufeld’s dissertation, from which this work is drawn, was chaired by Bruce M. Metzger and awarded a special prize by the Christian Research Foundation in 1960.

The relative boom of historical credal studies in the middle of the twentieth century was followed by relative silence for more than two decades. In 1991, nearly sixty years after Richardson’s *Creeds in the Making*, Frances M. Young sought to bring the conversion up to date with changing scholarship.²⁵ Young appreciated the continuing influence of Richardson’s work but looked to nuance it in light of current viewpoints concerning historiography. For Richardson, asserting that Christianity was a religion founded on historical facts was important in light of the antihistoricism of the nineteenth century.²⁶

Young came along to note that historical facts are always wrapped in interpretation. Therefore, understanding the development of the early creeds involves interpreting their connection to the historical facts and the beliefs of the early followers of Jesus regarding their experiences. Young structures her study by looking at specific doctrines expressed in the creeds,

²⁰ Fuhrman, *Creeds of the Church*, 11.

²¹ John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine, from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982).

²² Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 1.

²³ Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963).

²⁴ Neufeld uses the term *homologia* to signify what aspects of Christian theology were held in “agreement” and professed by a majority of the church from its inception. See Neufeld, *Earliest Christian Confessions*, 13–15.

²⁵ Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (London: SCM Press, 1991).

²⁶ See Richardson, *Creeds in the Making*, 5–10.

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much like Richardson did. Young's work is a brief yet invaluable update to earlier studies of the early development of the creeds.

In 1991, the Commission on Faith and Order held a conference on the nature of faith and creeds that resulted in a collection of papers compiled and edited by S. Mark Heim.²⁷ The papers cover a range of creedal studies topics but center on this common idea of the church seeking a unifying statement of belief. Several articles examine various fourth-century influences on the formation of the Nicene Creed that will prove extremely helpful for this current study.

In 2001, scholar John Behr embarked on a three-volume journey tracing the formation of Christian theology. The first volume stands as the most important for this present study. In this volume, entitled *The Way to Nicaea*, Behr examines the first three centuries of Christian thought leading up to the famed council of Nicaea.²⁸ Behr is quick to point out that he is not insinuating by the title that the council itself is the definitive moment of Christian theology, but rather his main goal is to examine the theological discourse that occurred and shaped the council. Behr staunchly asserts that neglecting this period of development leading up to the famous creed only leads to a misunderstanding of the council and the creed itself.²⁹ In many ways this work bridges the gap between a historical survey of the formation of the creeds and the theology that shaped this formation.

In 2002, Liuwe Westra completed a comprehensive survey of the origin and development of the Apostles' Creed.³⁰ In this work, Westra focuses on early creedal formulae and how they eventually led to the seventh-century formulation of the Apostles' Creed. In agreement with Kelly, Westra views the Apostles' Creed as a fusion of earlier Christological and Trinitarian formulations that emerged in Rome around the end of the second century and into the third.³¹ Westra's survey stands as an important recent work detailing the elusive history of the Apostles' Creed.

The purpose and scope of this current study do not require a detailed history of the development. Rather, by relying on these historical surveys, this study will provide some understanding of the development of

²⁷ S. Mark Heim, ed., *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century: Papers of the Faith to Creed Consultation, Commission on Faith and Order, NCCCUSA, October 25–27, 1989–Waltham, Massachusetts* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans for Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1991).

²⁸ John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vol. 1, *The Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

²⁹ Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 6.

³⁰ Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002).

³¹ Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, 21–72.

creeds with the goal of understanding how these creeds guided theological discourse. Constructing a systematic approach to theology by means of the creedal process is another goal of this study. To accomplish this, this study will attempt to show the value in identifying and articulating the essential identity markers of each category of theology as appropriate boundaries for theological discourse.

In 2003, famed historical theologian Jaroslav Pelikan published a historical and theological guide to the great creeds and confessions of the Christian tradition.³² This expansive work covers four major categories of creedal development: general definitions of creeds and confessions, the genesis of creeds, the authority of creeds, and the history of development from the apostolic period up to modern Christianity. As a premier historical theologian Pelikan pulls together a wide array of research to build a solid understanding of creedal development. This work will prove immensely helpful for any creedal scholar.

Theology of The Creeds

The second category one notices in creedal studies is the exploration of the theology found within the specific creeds themselves. While numerous works attempt this, this section will be limited to only a handful of these types of works in order to sufficiently show the scope and range of books in this category.

In 1935, Karl Barth published an in-depth survey of the theology of the Apostles' Creed entitled *Credo* and again revisited the creed in 1958 with a commentary of the creed in light of Calvin's catechism.³³ In the earlier *Credo*, Barth works his way through each significant point of the Apostles' Creed in order to extrapolate the original meaning of the creed and also to understand it better in light of modern thought. Being influenced by Anselm, Barth firmly believed that each new generation needed to understand again the core beliefs of the Christian faith. This is the work of theology, or *dogmatics* in Barthian terminology.

For Barth these core beliefs were contained in the creed and the creed itself provided a great basis for understanding theology. He says, "The Credo is fitted to be the basis of a discussion of the chief problems of Dogmatics not only because it furnishes, as it were, a ground-plan of Dogmatics but above all because the meaning, aim and essence of Dogmatics and the meaning, aim and essence of the Credo, if they are not

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

³³ See Barth, *Credo*, and *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed According to Calvin's Catechism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958).

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identical, yet stand in the closest connection.”³⁴ This connection will prove helpful in laying the foundation for this study.

Cambridge professor John Burnaby examined the theology of the Nicene Creed in 1960 in his work *The Belief of Christendom*, which was the result of a series of lectures he presented to the Cambridge Divinity Faculty.³⁵ Burnaby notes the influence of Kelly’s earlier work on the creeds and points to the Nicene Creed as the chief summary of the Christian faith. Lectures given at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, by Hugh Burnaby (no relation to the above Burnaby) examining the theology of the Apostles’ Creed were posthumously published in 1961. Both this series and the series by John Burnaby highlight the emphasis on creedal studies that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, especially in Great Britain.

As seen in the above subsection on historical surveys of the creeds, the relative interest in creedal studies was followed by a relative decline in interest, especially in the growing evangelical church. Toward the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, though, a resurgence has occurred, especially in terms of reexamining and reaffirming the theology of the earliest creeds. Many of these works were written for lay people with the intent of teaching theology. In 1991, Alister McGrath published a study focused on understanding and applying the Apostles’ Creed, and in 1998, Michael Horton examined the theology of the Apostles’ Creed in an attempt to reaffirm the heart of Christian faith and belief.³⁶

Most recently, in 2016, Michael Bird released a similar work to Horton’s, covering the essential elements of Christian belief as expressed in the Apostles’ Creed under the pointed title, *What Christians Ought to Believe*.³⁷ Bird specifically notes the need for affirming the creedal nature of Christianity in the evangelical tradition, which during the late twentieth century became staunchly opposed to the use of creeds in the church.³⁸

Bird’s work stands as the most recent representative of this renewed interest in the creeds and will prove quite helpful in exploring the theology of the Apostles’ Creed, yet it stands outside the main goal of this study. The goal here is to use these various explorations of the theology presented in these early creeds as a means of understanding the creedal process better, which then will be applied as a new approach to systematic theology.

³⁴ Barth, *Credo*, 1.

³⁵ John Burnaby, *The Belief of Christendom: A Commentary on the Nicene Creed* (London: SPCK, 1960).

³⁶ See Alister E. McGrath, *I Believe: Understanding and Applying the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991). See also Michael Scott Horton, *We Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles’ Creed* (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1998).

³⁷ Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

The Creedal Process and Theological Method

The third subsection of books this review will briefly survey pertains to works that either connect the creedal process with theology or ones that provide sufficient definitions of the discipline of theology in order to support the current study's focus of applying the creedal process to the process of systematic theology. In the evangelical tradition, many of the recent works stressing the connection between creeds and theology act as apologetic works stressing a renewal of interest in creeds as necessary for the church. In 2010, Robert Jensen, as a part of a series exploring the use of Scripture in the church, closely examines the connection between canon and creed. Jensen sufficiently shows that there is no struggle between creed and canon and in fact creeds are founded in Scripture and Scripture is full of creeds or creed-like formulas.

Jensen's work was followed by the work of Carl Trueman who stresses the necessity of creeds and confessions for the church and specifically the evangelical church, which includes some factions, Trueman underscores, that take pride in having no creed. While Trueman does not examine the theology of any given creed, he presents the case that a desperate need for the creedal process exists in the church today.

As stated earlier, it is important to also survey a handful of works that connect this study's research with the function and purpose of theology as a discipline. In order to apply the creedal process toward a systematic understanding of theology, examining those works that present theology in a manner influenced by the creedal process will be most important. These works and their authors will become dialogue partners of sorts for this study in terms of how they present the theological process.

Toward the end of his career, Karl Barth set out to summarize his decades of teaching and deep thinking about the topic of theology in a series of lectures he gave in the United States, which in turn compose what he has called an introductory examination of theology. This work combined with the earlier work, *Credo*, presents an integral understanding of the nature of theology and how the creeds give shape to the process.

Collected from decades of teaching theology, Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder's Preface to *Theology* presents theology as a historical stream guided along by various "communicators," like prophets, biblical writers, or Jesus himself. This stream carries with it the tradition of the past but also forges new ground for future generations. For Yoder, the various creeds and confessions of church history also guided this process.

In 1984, Yale theologian George Lindbeck published his groundbreaking work, *The Nature of Doctrine*, in which he presents an alternative approach to theology, termed the cultural-linguistic approach. In this work, Lindbeck presents church doctrines as being "communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered

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essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question,” as well as asserting that doctrines are second-order statements that guide theological discourse.

While it is beyond the scope of this section to debate Lindbeck’s reference to doctrines as second-order guidelines and not first-order affirmations, his model does present an interesting understanding of the connection between the creedal and theological process. For Lindbeck, the doctrines developed by the church were guided by “regulative principles,” such as the “monotheistic principle,” the “principle of historical specificity,” et cetera, and these regulative principles were expressed in the creeds and helped form the emerging Christian identity.

To fully examine the function of early creedal formulations as essential identity markers in theological discourse, this book provides an overview of creedal development. The articles affirmed in the conciliar creeds have their foundation in the biblical narrative and were not mere inventions of the councils, therefore, provide an excellent model for identifying and articulating EIMS.

Three case studies will also be examined which trace the development of three subcategories of theology: (1) Trinity and Christology, (2) creation, and (3) the Atonement. These case studies focus on how creedal affirmations directed the theological discourse of the centuries leading up to the conciliar creeds of the fourth century. With each case study, a survey of seven theological voices will show how later theological discourse was further influenced by creedal affirmations as essential identity markers. The book concludes with an examination of the benefits of the EIM model. The grand conversation of theology continues and invites each of us to have a voice. The EIM model serves as a helpful companion in this process.

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