

COMMENTS ON CREEDS AND RELATED MATTERS

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Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) means using the Bible as the sole authority for Christian belief and practice. It sets aside other normative sources for the Christian faith: creeds, tradition, apocryphal works, ecclesiastical pronouncements, additional primary literature beyond the sixty-six books of the canon, and persons claiming inner light and special revelation. The fundamental issue is not doctrinal error as much as practical authority. Going beyond the apostolic witness does open up the possibility—even likelihood—of false doctrine; but even if it did not, these other sources are disregarded. Other writings may have devotional value and helpful insight, but they do not determine what Christians are to believe and practice.

Creeds attempt to summarize Christian teaching. The early creeds sought to establish minimum doctrinal requirements for orthodoxy among Christians. That goal can imply that the rest of biblical content is negotiable or irrelevant. Beyond that, without realizing it, they can stray off into unrevealed matters and unnecessary viewpoints derived from tacit assumptions rather from biblical teaching.

Fourteen books, written during the time between Malachi and Christ, comprise the Apocrypha. Because they came from a time when “*there was no exact succession of prophets*,” they have at most a historical and devotional value. Similar secondary writings grew up after the close of the apostolic age, most of them motivated by a desire to advocate various false teachings based on Gnostic philosophy.

Tradition refers to prominent ideas that grew up over the centuries about items scripture does not address. They may be interesting and may offer historical information of varying likelihood, but they are not required for Christian understanding, and they are often unwholesome ideas rooted ultimately in Greek dualism.

Extra-canonical normative literature is a defining characteristic for what is labeled a “sect.” Writings of that sort attempt to offer special interpretation of Scripture or claim additional truth beyond the New Testament as the New Covenant superseded the Old. In Christ, however, his followers have God’s final revelation; nothing needs to supplement or replace it with something “better.” The Christian faith is something once and for all time delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

By-laws differ from creeds in that they deal with a congregation’s operation: who does what, how procedural decisions are made, and the like. They specify how the church operates in regard to non-doctrinal matters where variation does not conflict with New Testament teaching.

Statements of faith are sometimes prepared to indicate where a congregation or institution stands on certain doctrinal matters without meaning to imply that these contents set norms for fellowship or orthodoxy for Christians generally. Such outlines may be used internally for choosing leadership, but they are not considered authoritative for the faith, only for what the faithful here believe they should stand for.

From time to time, people arise from within the body of Christ, claiming to have received special revelation about the future or been given special guidance on what to do. Though conceivable in principle, such claims are suspect. Unless such people themselves can distinguish their own thoughts and the Spirit's communication, they should not "speak presumptuously" in the Lord's name lest they incur greater condemnation. Unless those persons' hearers have some indisputable basis for authenticating them, they should set those claims aside, because the word of God already received is sufficient for all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

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