

LESSON 32 - EARLY CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

What Did The Earliest Christians Believe?

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What did the earliest Christians believe? Their early creeds (a creed is a just a formal statement or system of beliefs) focused mostly on the fundamental, central message of Jesus's early followers: His divine lordship, death, and resurrection. The New Testament writings are already close to the events, dating to around AD 48-90, a few decades after Jesus's death and resurrection around AD 29-33. However, there are earlier Christian creeds and hymns—originally passed down orally—that *predate* and are *quoted in* the New Testament writings. These early Christian beliefs, often called "*proto-New Testament texts*," are found in the form of early creeds, formulations, and hymns. The evidence for these oral messages (what we'll call "PNTTs") includes: New Testament authors saying they received it and are passing it on; they are written in a different literary style; and though everything else is being written in the common language (Koine Greek), these are either written in Aramaic or with other poetic, rhythmical elements to them. This lesson reviews: 1) PNTTs about Jesus's death and resurrection, 2) PNTTs about Jesus's divine lordship, 3) the most significant PNTT.

1. PNTTs about Jesus's Death and Resurrection. Most PNTTs emphasized this. The one quoted in Acts 2:23-24, 36 says, "*This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it... Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.*" The PNTT quoted in Romans 4:25 says, "*[Jesus] who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*" And the PNTT quoted in Romans 10:9 says, "*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*"

2. PNTTs about Jesus's Divine Lordship. Many early PNTTs also centered on Jesus's unique divine nature and superiority. The one quoted in 1 Timothy 3:16 highlights Jesus's divine nature saying, "*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.*" The PNTT quoted in Philippians 2:5-11 expanded on Jesus's divine nature, opposing false teachings about Him being merely a human prophet: "*Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the*

name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Other creeds, such as this one quoted in Romans 1:3-4, emphasized His humanity and His deity. It says, *“Concerning his Son [Jesus], who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”* Many creeds emphasized His death and resurrection as features of His divine lordship. The creed quoted in 1 Peter 3:18 says, *“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”* And the creed quoted in 1 Timothy 2:5-6 says, *“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.”* The creed quoted in 1 John 4:2-3 reminded early believers to be on guard for lying spirits and false teachers unwilling to confess Jesus as Lord, or teaching that He wasn’t both fully divine and fully human. It says, *“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”*

3. The Most Significant PNTT. This occurs in Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church he founded in Corinth around AD 53-57. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 he says, *“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, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”* This is significant because of how early it was. No scholar dates this creed later than the mid-40s AD, and some, even secular, atheist scholars, date it within a year or two from the death of Jesus. It’s also noteworthy how he prefaced the recital of the creed by saying it is “of first importance.” Paul continues to highlight the importance of this early message in 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-19, *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”* This creed doesn’t *prove* Jesus rose from the dead but it does prove that the *earliest* followers *believed* He did. This also showed us that there were many witnesses of the resurrected Jesus still alive in the late 50s who could be asked about it at that time. Securing the memory of the Last Supper and Jesus’s death and resurrection was the focus of the ritual of communion. 1 Corinthians 11:23-24, 26 says, *“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me... For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”*

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for preserving the Bible in such a way that it’s observable how early and trustworthy our beliefs are so we have greater confidence in them. In Jesus’s name. Amen.