



Written by Frank Ramirez ~ Published January 12, 2000 ~ Last Updated, January, 2000 ©  
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It has been over twenty years since I first attended Bethany Theological Seminary. I'm not one of those blessed with great or even good recall, so my memory of my days there is muddled. The passing years tend to blur things. I took copious notes during most of my classes and those notes are still safe in a large box in the basement of our Indiana parsonage. Only rarely do I refer to them. What comes immediately to mind, however, are the stories told by the faculty. That solid rabbinical technique of illustrating lessons with sharp and memorable stories was used by most of my teachers there. One in particular, told by Dale Brown, came to mind. It goes like this. There was a godless man who fell down a well. During that hopeless time he spent at the bottom he discovered Christ and his need to depend upon others. After he was saved from the well he wanted to share this great gift of grace with others. So he went around pushing people down wells. The point of the story is that most of us expect others to find Christ exactly as we did, when in point of fact there are as many paths to the good news of salvation as there are people. I thought about this a lot in the wake of the debate centering around a few little words.

To get you up to speed I want to quote the [1991 Annual Conference Statement](#), which "affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, savior of the world and the head of the church, according to the scriptures." In answer to a query the 1995 Annual Conference in Charlotte called upon members and ministers to "clearly affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only divine Lord and Savior." In this case the word 'only' was the focus of the question. I've no problem with either statement, and I as well suspect that most Brethren from Alexander Mack to the present would have had no difficulty endorsing these propositions. But the debate didn't center around the veracity of the claims. Rather, concern was expressed that this quibbling over words might be leading us to a creedalism which we have avoided over the nearly three hundred years of our history. Moreover some wondered if as the years went by we would simply continue to add words and phrases until we finally had a creed.

We Brethren have stated that we have no creed but the New Testament. The New Testament is a lot longer than the shorthand theology that composes a creed, so the question should be asked, what is a creed, and what's wrong with it? Bernard Marthaler, for instance, writes: It is true that nowhere in the Scriptures does one find an authoritative list of Christian doctrines, but almost all the beliefs that are professed in the so-called Apostles' Creed and other early confessions of faith - notably, the Ecumenical Creed of Nicea-Constantinople - have their roots in the New Testament (Marthaler, "The Creed," Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 1987, p.5). And why don't we, as Brethren, support creeds, especially when they could form the basis of an ecumenical witness to the non-Christian world?

It might be helpful first to examine a creed, and to define the word. A creed is a formal statement of belief. It's a very helpful thing to have, to be honest. Take what is known as the Nicene Creed. It's one I recited every Sunday as a child, and this is the version I was familiar with it.

*"I believe in one God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and of all things seen and unseen:*

*And I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. Born of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, being of one being with the Father, by whom all things were made: who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was made flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and was buried, and on the third day he rose again according to the scriptures. And ascending into heaven He sits at the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who together with the Father and Son is adored and glorified, who spoke through the prophets. And I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”*

The word catholic, by the way, in this context means universal, and is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. Some people stumble over the word ‘apostolic’ as well. They needn’t. Although some communions interpret this to mean a succession from Peter through a series of individuals, almost like holy cooties, we Brethren know that the keys of the kingdom were given through Peter to all Christians, who equally share in the succession with their baptism.

Of course some of those terms can be a little tricky. God of God, light of light, true God of true God. What does that mean? Oh, and that business about one being with the father. Wars were fought over a single vowel when it came to that phrase. Another familiar creed, the Apostles’ Creed, is a little shorter. It was a European tradition during the Middle Ages that the twelve apostles in parting each contributed a clause to this latter creed, but that pious fiction was unknown in other Christian regions, and seems unlikely. The creeds which have been handed down over some centuries had early confessions of faith at their roots. These confessions were probably recited at baptism. The confession at 1 Timothy 3:16 (“He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory. ”) is a good example of this. “Jesus is Lord,” (1 Corinthians 12:3) is probably another example. There was probably a great diversity in beliefs and practices in the early Christian church, prior to the Edict of Milan in 313, which legalized what had been an illegal but for the most part tolerated faith. One of the disadvantages of the legalization of Christianity was the desire by the Emperor Constantine to impose a standardized faith from without.

In 325 AD Constantine called a Council of clergy from across the Roman Empire to answer a particular question - what is the nature of Jesus Christ? Arius, pastor of a church in Alexandria, Egypt, contended that God created the Son, and that the Son created everything else. Jesus was therefore not quite co-equal with God the Father. Arius had a talent for catchy slogans and rhymes, and his interpretation spread rapidly throughout Christendom. This was not simply a theological debate. Civil unrest was widespread, with fighting in the streets. As Rupert Davies put it: to Constantine’s extreme displeasure, the peace of the Empire was suddenly disrupted by the very people on whom he was relying to restore it and maintain it - the Christians (Davies, “Making Sense of the Creeds,” Epworth Press, London, 1987, p.6). Constantine’s Council in Nicea determined that the Son of God was fully divine, and they used the Greek expression “homo ousion,” of one substance, with the Father. Those who contended with this assertion used the phrase “homoi ousion,” of like substance. That one letter led to the torture and death of many in the religious wars that followed.

The Nicene Creed, and other creeds, therefore were never separated from the question of the relation of church and state. Although on one hand they represented an honest attempt to craft a uniform statement of belief based on scripture, and although most Christian believers would be able to affirm all the articles of the creeds.

This proved true throughout the history of Christendom, and was no less true at the time of the formation of the Brethren. In the wake of the Thirty Years War and the Treaty of Westphalia, in which membership in one of the three approved state churches and the recitation of creeds were essential with regards to one's citizenship, Brethren rejected creeds as litmus tests for church membership. This was not because Brethren had no core beliefs, nor because they refused to be pinned down on matters of faith. Historically, Brethren were more than willing to enter into open debate among themselves and with those of other denominations on the minutest points of doctrine. It has more to do with the way we come to our beliefs - through a process of joint scripture study and not through the imposition of beliefs from human authorities which might consider themselves more qualified and sanctified than others when it comes to theologizing. I think we Brethren have avoided establishing a creed for two reasons. The first was that creeds were used by state churches as a basis for persecution of non state churches, such as the Brethren. They were a litmus test to see who fit and who didn't fit within boundaries that were not established by the Bible but rather by church tradition. The second, and more important reason, we have and should continue to avoid creeds has to do with the way Brethren do Bible study. In communion with each other. The key phrase, to my mind, in the 1991 statement is "according to the scriptures." We do not affirm this statement because someone told us to. It's only after we have studied scripture that we make this affirmation!

This may seem like a small point, but I don't think it is. No one should be asked to affirm either statement until they have engaged in Bible study. Nor is it necessary to do so in order to begin the Christian journey. I was struck during my study of the gospel of Mark how those who followed Jesus least understood who he was. While the Geresene Demoniac had no questions about the supremacy of Jesus, and (to jump gospels) the Samaritan woman at the well saw Jesus and recognized him, the disciples, even after witnessing the calming of the storm or the feeding of the five thousand, asked each other, "Who then is this?" Recognition that Jesus is Lord is essential to beginning the Christian journey. The rest takes time and may involve a different path than my own. Remember the man who pushed others down wells? When we recite a creed without doing the work we're assuming we can get there by the same road. But Paul's journey was different from that given to Apollos and Priscilla and Aquila and Peter and all the rest!

Of course that means we won't all share the same signposts or landmarks as someone else's journey. We have to trust the one God and Lord to bring people to the kingdom by a path he has chosen. But the destination, the New Jerusalem, will be the same. One facet scripture readers discover is that believers coming to the text can honestly understand the words of the Bible itself in a different fashion, and those human understandings are what end up incorporated into a creed. Study not only of English translations, but the original biblical languages can lead to honest debate. What is actually expressed in the Bible, and what is based on interpretation over the centuries? You would be surprised how many basic assumptions shared by Christians have no basis in the text of the New Testament.

Some years ago I attended a conference at Elizabethtown College on the social transformation of the Church of the Brethren. Chris Bucher, an associate professor of religion there, gave one of the addresses, and called to mind her childhood memory of an old black leather bound Schofield Bible belonging to her grandmother, which had the place of honor in the middle of the living room. She recalled how more attention was given to carefully dusting around it than in reading it.

So in her talk called "Brethren and the Bible in the 20th Century" Bucher warned that "U.S. culture treats the Bible as an icon, and venerates it as an object without paying attention to its contents." She quoted statistics that seemed to indicate that while both Brethren and American society understood the Bible to be the word of God, most people have a profound ignorance regarding it, and only 17% read it daily. She encouraged regular Bible study, noting,

“Brethren have used scholarly methods for the purpose of discovering the meaning of the Bible for our day, and not to discredit it.” Bucher stressed that historically, Brethren have read the Bible with the assumption that it should lead to action. If our Creed is, as we proclaim, the entire New Testament, it is essential that every member read the entire New Testament in planned regular reading (such as was suggested in the J2K readings in 2000), and every member should read the entire Bible at less frequent intervals.

One helpful model when it comes to scripture study was suggested in a lecture given by Reneeta J. Weems at the Consultation on Biblical Literacy in February of 1994, which I attended with several members of the Church of the Brethren. Weems, a professor of Old Testament at Vanderbilt University, who was an economist before she became an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, suggested that the best way to promote Biblical Literacy might not have anything to do with promoting more Bible reading. Speaking about people who lived during what we might call ‘Bible Times’, she said, “Reading and formal study were privileges and luxuries for the mass of people eking out a living. Religious instruction was an oral event, done in community, not in print, and done within the context of worship.” In examining the Biblical record Weems suggested that “Private study of the written text was unheard of.” She focused on consistent use of the words ‘hear’ and ‘tell’ to emphasize the oral nature of the Biblical experience.

She was especially drawn to the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the eighth chapter of the Book of Acts. In that episode the eunuch is reading the Isaiah scroll when the apostle Phillip is sent to him. According to Weems it is “...the sole example of what we might call scripture study.” Even he -- a literate slave -- cannot understand what he is reading. This underscores the difference between reading and understanding. Interpretation and study are properly done in communion with believers, in dialog with scripture and each other. “We have ample evidence throughout the world of religious people, devout, genuine, authentic, and law abiding, who have never read a page of their holy text in their lives.” As an example of the way in which community Bible study worked, Weems called to mind her childhood in an African American Pentecostal church.

“Elder Riley and Deacon Foxworth railed at each other about the meaning of a text. 30 adults and one child, myself, came early so we could watch them trade rhetorical punches about the true meaning of the flood, the virgin birth, the creation, how many Johns are there anyway in the New Testament, and why the rapture would more likely take place in the day as well as the night.”

She reflected on how often they would pause to add, “Do you see what I’m saying?” Reading had nothing to do with it. If you have had the pleasure of buying a reading a slim volume called *The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack*, published by the Brethren Encyclopedia, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that this is precisely the method of Bible study employed the early Brethren. It is for this reason that we refer to Mack only as a “co-founder” of the church. The Brethren in concert studied scripture for the answers to hard questions, and they emphasized that again and again in their writings. They read the Bible together and formed their conclusions jointly. It may seem to be a long stretch from the AME church to German Pietists, but Brethren have long felt that Bible study is group study, because we are a people, not primarily persons.

One advantage to group study over individual study is that it provides a system of checks and balances. Many people approach the text as if it were a tool. We may have an aim in mind, and select verses that support our argument. We then command others to jump through these biblical hoops so that they reach the same conclusions.

The larger the circle of Bible study, the better. Begin with a small group in our church, and begin to draw in others. Take advantage of district and annual conference Bible studies, as well as those available in the larger Christian body. And most important of all, be open to where the word of God wants to lead you, not where you want the word of God to end up.

Signing on to a creed is like reading the end of a book without going through all the intervening chapters. It's trying to bypass the process. You can't. It's an integral part of being Brethren, of being Christian.

The down side is that we Brethren struggle a little when someone asks, "Well, what do Brethren believe?" The Brethren's Card is one example of how we've tried to answer that question. I wrote a statement of faith that is included in the Deacon's Manual published by the Association of Brethren Caregivers. And I agree wholeheartedly with the content of the statements produced by Annual Conference in 1991 and 1995. But I hope there are not any more. Sooner or later someone may come up with a well intentioned addition, which sounds correct, but is not biblically sound. We cannot jump ahead and sign a creedal statement without working our way there together. Not if we're Brethren, and more importantly, not if we're Christian.

### About the Author

Frank Ramirez is pastor of the Everett Church of the Brethren in Everett, Pennsylvania, and a prolific Brethren author whose articles frequently appear in denominational literature. He is the author of the recently published "The Love Feast," a compilation of history, theology, and personal insights surrounding the Brethren communion service. Ramirez was also evening worship speaker at the 2001 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren in Baltimore, Maryland. Please see other articles by Ramirez: Tracing the Source of Q, Tower of Siloam.

