



GROWING  
*in*  
CHRIST

J. I. PACKER

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*Growing in Christ*

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## Introduction

The motive that led me to write *Growing in Christ* was to provide a resource book for study groups, and also a do-it-yourself study course for adults who have no access to such a group. From that standpoint, this is a companion piece to my book, *Knowing God*, which has been used widely for group discussion. It offers a series of quick, brief outlines—“sprints” if you will—with questions and Bible passages for further study, covering the contents of the three formulae which have always been central in Christian teaching—the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, plus Christian baptism. These three formulae deal with the Christian’s convictions, communion with God, and code of conduct respectively; baptism speaks of God’s covenant, Christian conversion and commitment, and church life. Baptism is put in its logical place as the second part of the book, straight after our study of the faith into which Christians are baptized, and leading on to reflections on prayer and obedience as expressions of the life of discipleship.

My hope is that the book may have a use in all churches where the historic faith is held, and to this end I have confined my material to matters which C. S. Lewis called (borrowing from Richard Baxter) “mere Christianity.” I have, therefore, sought to focus on the essentials of the faith, except for three inescapable references to historical misunderstandings of the Creed and the gospel by the Roman Catholic Church (misunderstandings which many Roman Catholic theologians now labor to transcend).

The “sprints,” which are written in as compressed and suggestive a way as I can manage, are only pipe-openers, to start you talk-

## *Growing in Christ*

ing and thinking; for anything like a full treatment of each topic, readers must go on to the questions and the Bible study.

Many Christians today are uncomfortable with the word “catechism,” but they need not be. *Catechism* simply comes from a Greek word meaning “make to hear” and so “instruct.” From this word comes the English words of *catechism* (the form of instruction), *catechumen* (the person under instruction), *catechumenate* (the organized set-up for giving instruction), and *catechize* (a verb which originally meant “instruct,” though today it refers especially to a question-and-answer method of teaching). In Acts 8 we read how Philip instructed the Ethiopian eunuch; catechizing is just that process institutionalized.

Christianity is not instinctive to anyone, nor is it picked up casually without effort. It is a faith that has to be learned, and therefore taught, and so some sort of systematic instruction (*catechumenate*) is an essential part of a church’s life.

In the first Christian centuries there was a steady stream of adult converts and enquirers, and catechetical instruction took the form of lectures, given at their level. The Reformers’ strategy for revitalizing a Christendom that was ignorant of Christianity led them, however, to concentrate on systematic instruction for children. During a century and a half following Luther’s pioneer *Little Catechism* of 1529, literally hundreds of catechisms were produced, mostly though not exclusively for the young. Some of these were official church documents, others the private compositions of individual clergymen. The English Prayer Book catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism are among the best known. Probably most Protestants today associate catechisms and catechizing exclusively with nurturing children, and would not think of presentations like C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, or Billy Graham’s *Peace with God*, or John Stott’s *Basic Christianity*, or G. K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, as catechetical, because they are written for adults. But inasmuch as they are intended to instruct outsiders and establish insiders in fundamentals of the faith, catechetical is their proper description.

One great need today is a renewal of systematic Christian instruction—catechetical teaching—for adults. It need not be called that, nor need it take the form of rigid drilling in preset formulae,

which is how old-time Protestants taught their children; but somehow or other, opportunities must be given for folk in and just outside the churches to examine Christian essentials, because there are so many for whom this is a prime need. Preaching often does not help them, for preaching ordinarily assumes in both speaker and hearers confident certainty about the fundamentals of the faith, and where this is lacking, sermons are felt to be remote and even irritating because of what appear as their unexamined assumptions. But the proper place for examining, challenging, and testing the intellectual ABCs of Christianity is not the pulpit, but rather the systematic instruction given in catechetical teaching—at least, so Christian history suggests.

Modern educational theory sets great store by individual exploration, personal discovery, and group discussion, and there is no reason why today's adult instruction should not take this form—indeed, it will be best if it does, provided we remember that Christianity has a given content and continuity, and is not an “x,” an undefined quantity, to be re-invented through discussion in each new generation! C. H. Spurgeon's wicked story of the Irishman who, asked how he got on at the meeting of a small separatist church said, “Oh, it was lovely; none of us knew anything, and we all taught each other,” has a message for us here. One has known professedly Christian groups professedly studying Christian fundamentals on which this story would make a very apt comment. Guided study groups on Christian Basics, however, such as some churches known to me run year after year, constitute a genuine and much-needed renewal of the catechumenate—that is, the systematic teaching of Christian essentials—and I do not expect ever to find a church that would not benefit from their introduction.

It is my hope that this book may be used in some small way to help many come to a deeper understanding of the essentials of the Christian Faith, and, as the title indicates, to grow in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

J. I. PACKER

Part One

**Affirming the  
Essentials:**  
The Apostles' Creed

### **The Apostles' Creed**

I believe in God the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth;  
and in Jesus Christ  
his only Son our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried:  
he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father  
almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and  
the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit;  
the holy catholic church;  
the communion of saints;  
the forgiveness of sins;  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

## *Preface*

If you are going to travel cross-country on foot, you need a map. Now there are different kinds of maps. One sort is the large-scale relief map, which marks all the paths, bogs, crags, and so on in detail. Since the walker needs the fullest information about his chosen route, he must have a map of that sort. But for choosing between the various ways he might go, he could well learn more, and more quickly, from a small-scale map which left out the detailed geography and just showed him the roads and trails leading most directly from one place to another. Well-prepared walkers have maps of both kinds.

If life is a journey, then the million-word-long Holy Bible is the large-scale map with everything in it, and the hundred-word Apostles' Creed (so called, not because apostles wrote it—despite later legend, they didn't—but because it teaches apostolic doctrine) is the simplified road map, ignoring much but enabling you to see at a glance the main points of Christian belief. "Creed" means "belief"; many Christians of former days used to call this Creed "the Belief," and in the second century, when it first appeared, almost as we have it now, it was called the Rule of Faith.

When folk enquire into Christianity, their advisers naturally want to get them studying the Bible and to lead them into personal trust in the living Christ as soon as they can; and rightly so. But as means to both ends, it helps to take them through the Creed, as both a preliminary orientation to the Bible and a preliminary analysis of the convictions on which faith in Christ must rest.

Those convictions are trinitarian. The Creed tells us of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that having found out about them we might find them experientially. What do we learn from the Creed,



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as we study it? The answer has been summarized beautifully as follows:

“First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world.

“Secondly, in God the Son who hath redeemed me, and all mankind.

“Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God.”<sup>1</sup>

When one has learned this much, one is not far from God’s kingdom.

The purpose of knowledge is that we might apply it to life. This is nowhere truer than in Christianity, where true knowledge (knowledge of the true God) is precisely knowledge about God—applied. And knowledge about God, for application, is what is offered here, in the studies that follow.

### **Note:**

<sup>1</sup>*The Prayer Book Catechism.*

# I Believe in God

When people are asked what they believe in, they give, not merely different answers, but different sorts of answers. Someone might say, “I believe in UFOs”—that means, I think UFOs are real. “I believe in democracy”—that means, I think democratic principles are just and beneficial. But what does it mean when Christian congregations stand and say: “I believe in God”? Far more than when the object of belief is UFOs or democracy.

I can believe in UFOs without ever looking for one, and in democracy without ever voting. In cases like these, belief is a matter of the intellect only. But the Creed’s opening words, “I believe in God,” render a Greek phrase coined by the writers of the New Testament, meaning literally: “I *am believing into* God.” That is to say, over and above believing certain truths *about* God, I am living in a relation of commitment *to* God in trust and union. When I say “I believe in God,” I am professing my conviction that God has invited me to this commitment, and declaring that I have accepted his invitation.

## Faith

The word “faith,” which is English for a Greek noun (*pistis*) formed from the verb in the phrase “believe into” (*pisteuo*), gets the idea of trustful commitment and reliance better than “belief” does. Whereas “belief” suggests bare opinion, “faith,” whether in a car, a

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patent medicine, a protégé, a doctor, a marriage partner, or what have you, is a matter of treating the person or thing as trustworthy and committing yourself accordingly. The same is true of faith in God, and in a more far-reaching way.

It is the offer and demand of the object that determines in each case what a faith-commitment involves. Thus, I show faith in my car by relying on it to get me places, and in my doctor by submitting to his treatment. And I show faith in God by bowing to his claim to rule and manage me; by receiving Jesus Christ, his Son, as my own Lord and Savior; and by relying on his promise to bless me here and hereafter. This is the meaning of response to the offer and demand of the God of the Creed.

Sometimes faith is equated with that awareness of “one above” (or “beyond,” or “at the heart of things”) which from time to time, through the impact of nature, conscience, great art, being in love, or whatever, touches the hearts of the hardest-boiled. (Whether they take it seriously is another question, but it comes to all—God sees to that.) But Christian faith only begins when we attend to God’s self-disclosure in Christ and in Scripture, where we meet him as the Creator who “commands all men everywhere to repent” and to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ . . . as he has commanded us” (Acts 17:30; 1 John 3:23; cf. John 6:28 ff.). Christian faith means hearing, noting, and doing what God says.

### **Doubt**

I write as if God’s revelation in the Bible has self-evident truth and authority, and I think that in the last analysis it has; but I know, as you do, that uncriticized preconceptions and prejudices create problems for us all, and many have deep doubts and perplexities about elements of the biblical message. How do these doubts relate to faith?

Well, what is doubt? It is a state of divided mind—“double-mindedness” is James’ concept (James 1:6-8)—and it is found both *within* faith and *without* it. In the former case, it is faith infected, sick, and out of sorts; in the latter, it belongs to a struggle either toward faith or away from a God felt to be invading and making claims one does not want to meet. In C. S. Lewis’ spiritual autobi-

ography, *Surprised by Joy*, you can observe both these motivations successively.

In our doubts, we think we are honest, and certainly try to be; but perfect honesty is beyond us in this world, and an unacknowledged unwillingness to take God's word about things, whether from deference to supposed scholarship or fear of ridicule or of deep involvement or from some other motive, often underlies a person's doubt about this or that item of faith. Repeatedly this becomes clear in retrospect, though we could not see it at the time.

How can one help doubters? First, by *explaining* the problem area (for doubts often arise from misunderstanding); second, by *exhibiting* the reasonableness of Christian belief at that point, and the grounds for embracing it (for Christian beliefs, though above reason, are not against it); third, by *exploring* what prompts the doubts (for doubts are never rationally compelling, and hesitations about Christianity usually have more to do with likes and dislikes, hurt feelings, and social, intellectual, and cultural snobbery than the doubters are aware).

## Personal

In worship, the Creed is said in unison, but the opening words are "I believe"—not "we": each worshiper speaks for himself. Thus he proclaims his philosophy of life, and at the same time testifies to his happiness: he has come into the hands of the Christian God where he is glad to be, and when he says "I believe," it is an act of praise and thanksgiving on his part. It is in truth a great thing to be able to say the Creed.

## Further Bible Study

Faith in action:

- Romans 4
- Hebrews 11
- Mark 5:25-34

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

- What is the essential meaning of "faith" (Greek *pistis*)?
- What is the importance of the word "I" in the Creed's opening phrase?

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- What doubts about Christianity have you had to deal with in yourself and others?
- How can the approach outlined in this chapter help address doubts and questions we may have?

# The God I Believe In

**W**hat should it mean when we stand in church and say, “I believe in God”? Are we at this point just allying ourselves with Jews, Moslems, Hindus, and others against atheism, and declaring that there is some God as distinct from none? No; we are doing far more than this. We are professing faith in the God of the Creed itself, the Christian God, the God of the Bible—the Sovereign Creator whose “Christian name,” as Karl Barth put it, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If this is not the God in whom we believe, we have no business saying the Creed at all.

## **Idols**

We must be clear here. Today’s idea is that the great divide is between those who say “I believe in God” in some sense, and those who cannot say it in any sense. Atheism is seen as an enemy, paganism is not, and it is assumed that the difference between one faith and another is quite secondary. But in the Bible the great divide is between those who believe in the Christian God and those who serve idols—“gods,” that is, whose images, whether metal or mental, do not square with the self-disclosure of the Creator. One wishes that some who recite “I believe in God” in church each Sunday would see that what they actually mean is “I do *not* believe in God—not this God, anyhow!”

## **His Name**

The Bible tells us that God has revealed himself, establishing his identity, so to speak, by telling us his “name.” This “name” appears in three connections.

First, God gave his “proper name,” JEHOVAH (or Yahweh, as modern scholars prefer), to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13ff.; see also 6:3). The name means “I am who I am,” or “I will be what I will be” (RSV, text and margin). It declares God’s almightiness: he cannot be hindered from being what he is, and doing what he wills. Well did the AV translators render this name as “the LORD.” The Creed echoes this emphasis when it speaks of God the Father *almighty*.

Second, God “proclaimed the name of the LORD” to Moses by delineating his moral character—“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity . . . but who will by no means clear the guilty . . .” (Exodus 34:5-7). This “name”—you could call it a revealed description—discloses both God’s *nature* and his *role*. It is a declaration whose echoes reverberate throughout the Bible (see Exodus 20:5 ff.; Numbers 14:18; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:17, 32; Psalm 86:5, 15; 103:8-18; 111:4-9; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8 ff., 17, 20; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Romans 2:2-6), and all God’s acts which Scripture records confirm and illustrate its truth. It is noteworthy that when John focuses the two sides of God’s character by saying that he is both *light* and *love* (1 John 1:5; 4:8)—not love without righteousness and purity, nor rectitude without kindness and compassion, but holy love, and loving holiness, and each quality to the highest degree—he offers each statement as summarizing what we learn from Jesus about God.

## **Three in One**

Third, the Son of God told his disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). “Name,” note, not “names”: the three persons together constitute the one God. Here we face the most dizzying and unfathomable truth of all, the truth of the Trinity, to which the three paragraphs of the Creed (“the Father . . . his only Son . . . the Holy Spirit”) also bear witness.

What should we make of it? In itself, the divine tri-unity is a mystery, a transcendent fact which passes our understanding. (The same is true of such realities as God's eternity, infinity, omniscience, and providential control of our free actions; indeed, all truths about God exceed our comprehension, more or less.) How the one eternal God is eternally both singular and plural, how Father, Son, and Spirit are personally distinct yet essentially one (so that tritheism, belief in three gods who are not one, and Unitarianism, belief in one God who is not three, are both wrong), is more than we can know, and any attempt to "explain" it—to dispel the mystery by reasoning, as distinct from confessing it from Scripture—is bound to falsify it. Here, as elsewhere, our God is too big for his creatures' little minds.

Yet the historical foundation-facts of Christian faith—a man who was God, praying to his Father and promising that he and his father would send "another Comforter" to continue his divine ministry—and equally the universally experienced facts of Christian devotion—worshipping God the Father above you and knowing the fellowship of God the Son beside you, both through the prompting of God the Holy Spirit within you—point inescapably to God's essential three-in-oneness. So does the cooperative activity of the Three in saving us—the Father planning, the Son procuring, and the Spirit applying redemption. Many Scriptures witness to this: see, for instance, Romans 8:1-17; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Thessalonians 2:13 ff.; 1 Peter 1:2. When the gospel of Christ is analyzed, the truth of the Trinity proves to be its foundation and framework.

It was only through the work of grace which centers on the Incarnation that the one God was seen to be plural. No wonder, then, if those who do not believe in the work of grace doubt the truth of the Trinity too.

But this is the God of the Creed. Is this, now, the God whom we worship? Or have we too fallen victims to idolatry?

### **Further Bible Study**

God revealed:  
1 John 1:1-18



### **Questions for Thought and Discussion**

- What does it mean to say: “In the Bible the great divide is between those who believe in the Christian God and those who serve idols”? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What is the basic meaning of God’s name JEHOVAH? What does it tell us about him?
- Why did Christ direct his disciples to baptize “in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”?

# The Father Almighty

In any church where saying the Creed is part of the worship service it is likely that God's fatherhood will have been celebrated in song ("Glory be to the Father . . .") before the Creed is said, for it is a theme which with a sure instinct hymn writers have always highlighted. But how should we understand it?

## Creation

Clearly, when the Creed speaks of "God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," it has in immediate view the fact that we and all things besides depend on God as Creator for our existence, every moment. Now to call creatorship fatherhood is not unscriptural: it echoes both the Old Testament—Malachi 2:10, "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" and the New Testament—Acts 17:28, where Paul preaching at Athens quotes with approval a Greek poet's statement: "*we are his offspring.*" Nonetheless, both these quotations come from passages threatening divine judgment, and Paul's evangelistic sermon at Athens makes it very clear that though the offspring relationship implies an obligation to seek, worship, and obey God, and makes one answerable to him at the end of the day, it does not imply his favor and acceptance where repentance for past sins and faith in Christ are lacking (see the whole speech, verses 22-31).

Some who stress the universal fatherhood of God treat it as implying that all men are and always will be in a state of salvation, but that is not the biblical view. Paul speaks of persons to whom “the word of the cross is folly” as “perishing” (1 Corinthians 1:18), and warns the “impenitent” that “you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath” (Romans 2:5), however much they are God’s offspring.

## **Father and Son**

In fact, when the New Testament speaks of God’s fatherhood it is not with reference to creation, but in two further connections. The first is *the inner life of the Godhead*. Within the eternal Trinity is a family relation of Father and Son. On earth, the Son called the One whom he served “my Father” and prayed to him as Abba—the Aramaic equivalent of a respectful Dad.

What this relationship meant Jesus himself declared. On the one hand, the Son loves the Father (John 14:31) and always does what pleases the Father (8:29). He takes no initiatives, depending instead every moment on the Father for a lead (5:19ff., 30), but he is tenacity itself in cleaving to the Father’s known will. “My Father . . . not as I will, but as thou wilt . . . thy will be done” (Matthew 26:39, 42). “Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?” (John 18:11).

On the other hand, the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20) and makes him great by giving him glory and great things to do (5:20-30; 10:17ff.; 17:23-26). Giving life and executing judgment are twin tasks which have been wholly committed to him, “that all may honor the Son” (5:23).

God’s loving fatherhood of his eternal Son is both the archetype of his gracious relationship with his own redeemed people and the model from which derives the parenthood that God has created in human families. Paul spoke of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” as “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Ephesians 1:3; 3:14ff.). Human families, by their very constitution, reflect the Father-Son relationship in heaven, and parent-child relationships should express a love that corresponds to the mutual love of Father and Son in the Godhead.

## Adoption

The second connection in which the New Testament speaks of God as Father has to do with *the believing sinner's adoption* into the life of God's family. This is a supernatural gift of grace, linked with justification and new birth, given freely by God and received humbly by faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. "To all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born . . . of God . . ." (John 1:12ff.). The message Jesus sent to his disciples on rising from the dead was: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17). As disciples, they belonged to the family; indeed, in that very sentence Jesus called them "my brethren." All whom he has saved are his brothers.

When the Christian says the first clause of the Creed, he will put all this together and confess his Creator as both the Father of his Savior and his own Father through Christ—a Father who now loves him no less than he loves his only begotten Son. That is a marvelous confession to be able to make.

## Almighty

And God the Father is "almighty"—which means that he can and will do all that he intends. What does he intend for his sons? Answer: that they should share all that their elder Brother enjoys now. Believers are "heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17). Suffer we shall, but we shall not miss the glory: the Father almighty will see to that. Praise his name.

## Further Bible Study

On our adoption in Christ:

- Ephesians 1:3-14
- Galatians 4:1-7

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

- What does the statement "we are his offspring" say about God's fatherhood? What does it leave out?
- How is God's fatherhood seen within the Trinity?
- Why can Jesus call Christians his "brethren"?