

## PRAISE FOR *THE JESUS CREED*

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—GEORGE H. GUTHRIE, Benjamin Perry Professor of Bible, Union University

LOVING GOD, LOVING OTHERS

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# The Jesus Creed

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Scot McKnight



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*The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*

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## **F O R E W O R D**

My first exposure to the work of Scot McKnight came through my wife, Nancy. She breezed through the doorway one day and said, “I met a man at church who has a fabulous mind, you absolutely have to meet him.” Whenever my wife becomes that interested in another man, it piques my curiosity, so I arranged to have lunch with him.

That first meeting led to a series of conversations and was the beginning of a relationship that continues to this day over a couple of thousand miles.

Scot has the kind of fertile mind that ranges from conversion theory to the debate over the search for the historical Jesus to Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson’s triangle offense, in a single sitting. He relates well to people across every kind of spectrum. I suppose it’s a backhanded compliment to refer to a scholar as a normal guy, but I can’t think of a better term to describe Scot.

Most of all, Scot has a great love for Jesus, a passionate commitment to discover all that can be learned about Jesus’

message and world. He combines this with a deep desire to help make the best of such learning accessible to people who will never earn a degree in Semitic languages or biblical archaeology.

When I was in seminary, David Hubbard (who was both president and Old Testament professor) talked about how the average seminary student today has access to more information than Luther or Calvin did at the height of their learning. The problem, of course, is that in this era of information overload we have more information than we can handle streaming into our consciousness every day, from junk mail to high-definition screens and fiber-optic cables. In this book we find no such informational overload, because Scot keeps his information in the proper perspective.

In *The Jesus Creed*, Scot has given a great gift to any follower of Jesus as he invites us back into the world in which Jesus lived. We learn, a step at a time, what it meant to be a Jewish rabbi in first-century Galilee. In these pages the identities, hopes, and struggles of Joseph and Mary, of John the Baptist, and of Simon Peter are portrayed in ways that are both fresh and deeply illuminating. Scot wears his learning lightly. We discover the significance of what it means to wrestle with being one of the *tsadiqim*\* or the *Am ha-aretz*\*—not simply for the sake of information, but because of the light it sheds on our own calling to follow Jesus. Scot, in the words of Garrison Keillor, “puts the hay down where the goats can get it.”

I am excited for you as you begin your journey through the pages of this book. I believe two gaps will grow smaller for you as you read it. One is the distance between you and Jesus. His world will draw closer to yours. In discovering the actual identities and struggles of the people around Jesus, you will discover that you are



reading your own story. You will find that little Gestalt aha! escaping from your lips as time after time you come to understand the essential dynamics at work in the gospel narratives.

The other gap that will shrink is the one between the person you are right now and the person God created you to be. Dallas Willard has noted that all of us are constantly being spiritually formed for better or for worse—our wills and hearts are being shaped whether we want them to be or not. Jesus is, among other things, the maestro of spiritual formation. *The Jesus Creed* is both an invitation and a resource to put your spirit into his hands, to dine at the Master's table. Enough with the preliminaries: time to get on with the main course.

*John Ortberg*  
*Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church*



## P R E F A C E

I didn't confess a creed until I discovered Jesus' personal creed. Occasionally, of course, I'd find myself speaking at a church where we all confessed the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. Still, confessing a creed wasn't routine for me. Now I begin each day in a quiet recitation of the one used and taught by Jesus. When it comes to mind throughout the day, I recite it again. It is, for me, his gentle reminder of what life is all about.

All around the world, young and old, people are asking about spiritual formation. What does it mean, they are asking, to live before God in our world? For direction, they turn to modern writers as diverse as Thomas Merton and Richard Foster and Dallas Willard. As well, they turn to classical spiritual masters who have taught the church for the ages, masters like St. Augustine and Teresa of Avila and Brother Lawrence. I have turned to both the modern and classical myself, and I will turn to them again.

But sometimes we forget the source of these spiritual masters. Sometimes we forget to turn to the source of their ideas, to Jesus and to his words about what it means to be spiritually formed. I ask you to turn to him in this book, to discover his answer to the great question about the center of spiritual growth.

A Jewish expert on the *Torah*\* (the Law) once asked Jesus what was the most important thing for spiritual formation. Jesus' answer turned history upside down for those who followed him. This book is an invitation for you to explore Jesus' answer to that man. I call it the *Jesus Creed*, and what he said should shape everything we say about Christian spirituality. Everything.

*Note for the reader:* In the following text many words in italics are explained in the *Glossary of Terms* at the back of this book. (The first time these words appear in the text they are marked with an asterisk.) The sources for quotations, including references to the Bible, can be found in *References* at the back of the book. Each chapter can be understood without reading the Gospel passages listed at the beginning of the chapters, but it is recommended that each reading begin with those biblical passages.

**PREFACE TO THE  
TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION**

There were a number of unknowns when I first wrote *The Jesus Creed* a decade ago. The first was that I didn't know how the "discovery" of the Jesus Creed—those words of Jesus at Mark 12:29–32—would change my life so much.

In teaching college students about Jesus I became convinced that Jesus, as a good observant Jew, daily recited the *Shema* (love God) and that he amended that daily recitation by adding "love your neighbor as yourself." The *Jesus Creed*, then, is loving God and loving others. What I didn't know was what happens to a person—in this case, me—when you begin and end a day by reciting the *Jesus Creed*. What I didn't know was that the *Jesus Creed*, like the Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer, would accompany me throughout the day so much that I found (and still find) myself saying the *Jesus Creed* dozens of times a day. It has become my mantra, my breath prayer, my spirituality.

Saying the *Jesus Creed* like this is dangerous for your moral health. Why "dangerous"? Because this little creed-like prayer makes me aware of how often I don't love someone else, how I need to love this specific person on my personal path in this very

moment, and how pervasive love can become. I have discovered why the apostle Paul said loving your neighbor as yourself is the *whole* Torah, and not just one of the commandments. To follow the *Jesus Creed* is the biggest challenge of my life.

The second unknown was that writing *The Jesus Creed* changed my career. Perhaps I can finesse that and say it turned my career into a pastoral vocation.

My wonderful publicist at Paraclete, Carol Showalter, told me to get a website and then she encouraged me to maintain a blog, and so I did. Little did I know that my blog would take off and become a frequently visited site, and little did I know that pastors and lay folks alike would ask me questions and make confessions and tell me personal stories. Little did I know that I would shift my reading habits toward books that would help my blog's readers, and little did I know what it meant when Carol told me that I had to be willing to "go on the road." Well, Carol, I've been on the road for ten years thanks to you. Kris, my wife, and I have seen parts of the world we would never have seen apart from *The Jesus Creed*. We have sat in homes in South Africa, prayed with others in Denmark, taught the *Jesus Creed* in Australia, and have been to the four corners of the USA to encourage others to recite the *Jesus Creed* daily.

Finally, I did not know that *defining* love would become so important to me. When I wrote *The Jesus Creed* I wanted to avoid a definition of love because I didn't want others to put the book down because they didn't agree with my definition. But deep in my heart I was not satisfied with not explaining what love is according to *The Jesus Creed*. So, here goes, four elements of love.

Love is (1) a rugged commitment (2) to be *with* another person, (3) to be *for* another person, (4) and this commitment is

aimed *unto* becoming Christlike—becoming loving, and holy, and righteous and good and just and peaceful. This translates into four principles: the principles of commitment, presence, advocacy, and direction. As you read *The Jesus Creed* keep this definition in mind: to love another person in this world means you are committed to being with that person and to being for that person, and you are committed to growing with them to become the person God made you to be.

Jesus liked the unknown because he was one who loved others. He didn't know who might interrupt his day and who might join the band of disciples, and he didn't know that a life of love challenges us to the core of our being. Well, yes, okay, he did know that and it is now ours to know it. More than anything else, I want to encourage you to begin your day and end your day saying the *Jesus Creed* and then whenever it comes to mind, say it again.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

*Scot McKnight*  
*Epiphany 2014*





**INTRODUCTION TO THE FIFTEENTH  
ANNIVERSARY EDITION:  
LOVE IN THE JESUS CREED**

G O S P E L   R E A D I N G S  
*John 13:34–35*

Jesus loved. Those associated with him  
are also to love.

The first thing I learned about defining what it means to call God “love,” as one of Jesus’ first followers, John, did, is that love defies definition. The second was American English dictionaries help us understand how modern Americans use the word “love” but they don’t define love as Jesus understood and practiced love. The third thing I learned is that humans are not ones to watch if one wants to know what love is. Every now and then one meets a human about whom one can say, “That person knows how to love.” But isn’t it often the case that we soon are wondering *What’s that seemingly loving person like when no one is watching?* The fourth thing I learned about defining love is that if we want to know what Jesus meant by love we need to start with God. We need to watch God love if we want to understand what love is.

To know and understand love is to know and understand God.

Not everyone wants to play the definition game, especially when it comes to defining love. Yet, everyone loves a definition.