

The Psychology of Core Beliefs and the Therapy of the Creed

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Beliefs matter at a spiritual level and at a psychological level, especially when we live by the beliefs we hold. Part of the way Saints became Saints was that fact that they lived on the basis of their beliefs. The reason hypocrites were hypocrites is that they didn't.

In the psychological realm, it's not that difficult to live according to one's beliefs. In fact, it happens automatically. Have you ever noticed how a small setback can make you feel just terrible, even though anyone can see that it's no big deal? Have you ever noticed a push to do something perfectly, even though you know a perfect job isn't necessary? We all react to people, places, and events in our lives in ways that are sometimes surprising and not readily explainable. There is something else that seems to be directing our reactions and our drives, something that cognitive therapists call schemata or core beliefs and have to do with how a person sees himself, his future, and his world. Outside of therapy, people don't think much about these beliefs or even recognize them, for they are felt as "absolute truths" or just the way things are.

Now, these core beliefs in turn generate intermediate beliefs in the form of assumptions and rules for avoiding pain and finding pleasure or satisfaction. An example of a core belief is "I'm inadequate," a belief that can generate rules such as "If I work very hard, I can do okay" and "If I don't do great, then I've failed." These rules in turn leads to compensatory strategies such as developing high standards, working very hard, over preparing, looking for shortcomings, and avoiding seeking help. In Ancient Christian Wisdom, I described the way these core beliefs and rules operate and can change as follows: "As tools for decoding particular situations, schemata are dormant if no information can be found in a situation to activate them. They vary in terms of the number of

situations in which they can be used, their capacity to be modified, and their intensity when activated. Close to the surface of a person's consciousness are intermediate schemata or beliefs that are made up of rules, attitudes, and assumptions about various situations. These schemata focus on safety versus danger and pleasure versus pain. Further from a person's awareness are core schemata with rigid and global ideas about oneself and others. These core beliefs tend to revolve around notions of perceived helplessness in terms of competence and control as well as notions of perceived unlovability in terms of acceptance. Although people are no more aware of their schemata in the form of rules and core-beliefs than they are of the grammatical structures that they use when speaking, these schemata have a great influence on how they react."

Another way to look at core beliefs is through attachment theory that deals with the initial way an infant comes to look at the world. Based on their experience, some infants have strong positive feelings toward their mothers and develop a secure attachment; other infants experience their relationship in an ambivalent way; a final group may have an indifferent or even hostile relationship with their mothers. In the first case of a secure attachment, the infant feels the security of the mother's comfort and protection that gives the infant boldness to independently explore the environment. In this best of situations, the infant develops core beliefs about being loved and being competent. On the other hand, if the parent scolds the infant for seeking comfort or for exploring, the child may develop core beliefs about being unloved and incompetent. In other words, the primary dysfunctional core beliefs about being unworthy, unlovable, and helpless have a lot to do with early attachments. Further relationships in life continue to shape those core beliefs about the self and how the world works.

What is the point of this long psychological preface and what does it have to do with the Nicene Creed? The Nicene Creed is concise expression of the divine revelation of the love of God the Father

through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit to the entire world and to each soul. It represents time-tested beliefs that are holy, wholesome, and transfigurational. What would it mean if the believer could deeply assimilate the beliefs laid out in the Creed on the same level as the core-beliefs described earlier? Couldn't the Creed potentially reshape idiosyncratic core beliefs or even create new ones ex nihilo? Couldn't it change one's perspective on life, death, loved ones, difficult people, and one's own self-image? Couldn't it affect our rules for living and even our automatic thoughts? Even the words "I believe" indicate that the soul can know more than the mind can discover through logic. And the words "I believe in one God the Father Almighty" don't they point to an absolute bedrock that relativizes all our self-evaluations and assures us that we have such a Father and that our souls are hence of infinite value?

You might legitimately ask, "Since I already believe in God, why should I adopt the ancient Creed of Nicea as a set of core beliefs?" The Nicene foundation is a secure base for beliefs provided by those who confessed Christ, suffered for Christ, loved Christ more than life itself, and experienced Christ in all his humanity, in all his divinity, in all his humility, and in all his glory. The lives of those at that council were the virtuous lives of Christ-like souls whose one aim was to proclaim the same Truth that Christ revealed to his holy disciples and led to the salvation of countless souls. Their words were in accord with their lives and their lives with their words and all was in accord with the revelation of Christ Jesus. Without such a Nicene foundation we run the risk of a belief in a God that is merely an extension of the early childhood attachments, which would later develop into helpful or harmful core beliefs. In other words, we run the risk of believing in a God created in our own image and likeness. Perhaps, the best reason to adopt the Nicene Creed is that it was the culmination and definitive confession of the church, the entire body of believers who had experienced God's love and mercy through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed is the

Body of Christ's word on Who Christ is. And we know "their testimony is true."

In the next set of Sunday blog posts, I would like to go through the Nicene Creed, and consider how those beliefs can shape or reshape our own core beliefs if we believe that creed with all our heart and all our soul. I suspect we will find a wealth of health and wholeness in every phrase. I suspect we will find an assurance that we are loved, that we are never alone, that we are not really helpless, and that our destination in this life is greater than anything we could imagine on our own, the revelation of life abundant and everlasting in Christ (To be continued).