

Our life story: Creedal relevance

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

Tom walked into my office looking glum. He tossed his backpack on the floor, fell into a chair by my desk, sighed, and then rummaged through his bag for the registrar's form. Tom is a first-year seminary student, and I'm his counselor. We walked through the courses he would be taking, most of them part of our core curriculum. Tom's lack of enthusiasm was screaming at me. Finally I took the bait: "So, Tom, what's the matter?"

His hands went up in the air as he shot back, "What's the deal with all of these required courses? When do we get to study things that are relevant?" Ah, I thought, the old "Let's make thousands of years of inherited tradition relevant to me" argument. I'd just had a similar conversation with a woman in the congregation where I serve, who wondered why we repeat the "same old creed" each Sunday.

Whenever someone starts talking about relevance, the focal point is always on the self. The individual is the one, and the only one, who gets to decide if something is relevant.

The assumption behind the relevance agenda is that we are on our own to construct life as best we can. Relationships, work, place, philosophies and religion are all à la carte resources that can, or cannot, be used in building a life that we prefer. Our choices depend on their relevance to our cherished ideal of the self.

Relevance is such an unquestioned idol of contemporary society that many congregations have grown by marketing their ability to provide relevant programs, music and preaching. It's as if they are saying, "Our church can provide better products than the rest of society as you try to collect the pieces of a life you will like."

The problem with this success at being relevant is—well, God. The church marketers are claiming that they can make God relevant to you, but when they do this, God ceases to be God and becomes instead just one more optional resource. By contrast, the historic churches and the seminaries that serve them are filled with old

theological traditions. Most of them don't feel particularly relevant on any given day. That's by design. Their devotion is not to make the gospel relevant to the individual, but to make the individual relevant to the gospel. This is the function of our creeds.

We believe that the individual's life is not self-constructed but created by God, and that this construction began not when the individual was born, but with the words, "In the beginning God."

We believe that the end of the individual's story has already been written. According to the last book of the Bible, it ends wonderfully. It gets a little scary just before the end, but God makes a home among mortals, and a tree grows up out of the river of life with leaves for the healing of the nations. Nothing we do during our short life is going to make that ending any better or worse.

We believe that the best chapter of our life's story did not happen when we graduated from school, got a job or had children. The most formative chapter was not the time we failed at something important, lost a spouse or contracted a disease. The most powerful chapter, the one that changes everything, is when the word became flesh and dwelled among us.

We believe that this story gives our lives an eternity of meaning and purpose precisely because the story is not about us. It includes us, which is more of a grace than we can fully appreciate, but it's not about us. Isn't that a blessing?

We are dominated by an exaggerated sense of the self. We worry about "my job," "my kids," "my health," and when we're stuck in traffic we ask, "Why me?" By the time we make it to church on Sunday we're sick and tired of the self and ready to hear a better story, a glorious story revolving around Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is why both the seminary and the church I serve are relentless in declaring "core curriculum requirements." The seminary requires courses in biblical studies, theology and church history because it wants pastors to be scholars of the inherited Christian drama. Their future parishioners will count on them to be well trained as holy storytellers. Similarly, the historic churches have a liturgy that doesn't include many optional electives. It requires worshipers to join in praise to God, confession of sin, proclamation of the word, sacraments of grace, prayers for others, offerings and thanksgivings. Week after week the liturgy keeps telling the same identity-shaping story.

From the perspective of a casual observer, not much is going on in either the seminary curriculum or the church liturgy that is relevant to felt needs of the individual. But if you peer beneath the individual's clamoring and conflicting desires, you may find a soul that has begun to breathe again.