

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE XI.

CRITICAL NOTE.

THE APOSTLES' CREED MORE OR LESS.

THERE is no more venerable or wide-spread symbol of the Christian church than that one styled the Apostles' Creed. It has come nearer than any other formula to an adequate expression of our common faith. Augustine calls it, "Regula fidei brevis et grandis; brevis numero verborum; grandis pondere sententiarum." It has embedded itself in ritual and covenant of prelatical and democratic churches alike, and multitudes look up to it with veneration almost equal to that accorded to the heart of the Scriptures in the teaching of Jesus. Yet it cannot be taken upon thoughtful lips to-day without many reservations, additions, and interpretations, which depart widely from the original meaning given to phrase and word. When it is brought close to the one standard and test of all creeds, the plain teaching of Jesus Christ, it appears that some things are stated in a misleading way, and others which Jesus held essential are left out altogether. Let us examine the symbol in the light of the simple teaching of Jesus, and seek a comparison between the two.

It is hardly necessary to remark that the title is a misnomer. The creed is ancient, even down to the early Christian centuries, but it is in no such sense apostolic as tradition has claimed when asserting that an apostle was author of each portion of it. Nor is it apostolic in a broader historic sense as the precise formula used by those whom Jesus appointed to serve as his ministers and organize his church on earth. It is a growth, formed through generations or even centuries, and may be intercepted by the student at several stages of its incompleteness. The natural action of sympathetic minds within the faith, and of antagonists without, conspired to shape the formula hundreds of years after the last apostle had died. Doubtless the name attached to it has conferred a certain air and weight of authority. Yet it has no authority whatsoever, save as time and usage have given it. To have true authority, a creed must first command our full assent. That is the Protestant doctrine of authority.

No one employs a creed to express all of his faith, nor to declare his literal acceptance of every word and statement. There are so many ways in which to take a statement of doctrine, and every one must take it as he can. No two persons ever see the same rainbow. All who look when conditions are right see the refracted light in its prismatic coloring in the sky, but each observer really sees only his own bow. Position, atmos-

phere, subjective conditions, determine our apprehension of a creed. I cannot say to others, "You must accept my interpretation of the creed," any more than I can say, "You must see my private and particular rainbow." So long as heavenly light and beauty are filling our eyes, that is enough.

There are certain statements in the Apostles' Creed which so brief a summary of the essentials of faith seems not to need. Let us notice some of them, and discuss their claim to a place in such a symbol.

1. "Born of the Virgin Mary." This statement introduces a question of literary criticism into the creed. The intellectual attitude of a scholar on such a question ought not to become a barrier at the entrance to his confession. Quite aside from the question of the truth or falsity of the chronicle of the virgin birth given in two of the Gospels, the fact has no decisive bearing upon the divinity of Christ. That depends upon his being conceived by the Holy Ghost, not upon the method of conception, and it is demonstrated by his life, not by any miraculous change in his mother. If modern science could by some miraculous wisdom prove to us that no miracles were worked at the hands of Jesus, he would still stand divine before the world, and without impeachment remain the Son of God. Not once all through the Gospels, apart from the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, is reference made to the manner of his birth. Jesus himself never refers to it, either to sustain the faith of his disciples or to convince the skeptics about him. The fact is not important enough for a place in our creed. Some earnest and devout Christians doubt the fact, because of its to them rather slender historical support. Shall they be debarred from the church by the creed? Such a symbol should not be an iron door, but a window looking into heaven, filled with clearest glass, that divine radiance may fill all who through it gaze upward. This clause was used at first as a defense of the divinity of Christ, no doubt. It has ceased to serve as such, and would not weaken the creed by its absence.

2. "He descended into hell," or "hades." Modifications have already come into this clause, because of its obscurity, its non-essential character, and changing conceptions of the last things. It has come to mean the same as "was buried," and is omitted usually in non-liturgical communions. Even among ritualists, permission has been granted to omit it altogether, and hell is frequently softened to hades. The fact that it can be so omitted without appreciable loss is suggestive of its non-essential quality. The old theological conception of a pure substitutionary atonement, in which the thought was consistently carried out to its full length, included a literal descent of Jesus into hell to suffer the penalty of our sin. That view has pretty well vanished from current thinking. Moreover, Jesus never spoke of any such thing as this article implies. It has no adequate scriptural basis, and lives only by sufferance, not by service.

3. "From thence he shall come." The literal rendering of this clause makes an earthly second coming of Christ a portion of our creed. Now this may be true, or it may not be true. The Christian world is divided regarding it, in accordance with the prevalent method of interpretation of the Scriptures. Jesus left the matter in no certain light, or else his disciples failed to transmit clear ideas imparted to them by him. The apocalyptic element so colors and transfigures all statements regarding the future, especially the last things, that it is peculiarly hard for us occidentals to comprehend the meaning of the oriental imagery. The one fact all are agreed upon is this,—that Christ the ascended Lord is to be the eternal judge of all men. The place and time and manner of that assize are among the unanswered problems of our faith. To put a statement leaning toward one side of so doubtful a question into a standard confession is not catholic at least. It does not make for unity nor for clearness and strong faith. Moreover, the teaching of Jesus in more than one place indicates that judgment is personal and immediate for every one at death, without delay in waiting for a general judgment.

4. "The resurrection of the body." This statement is not true to modern thinking. It must be explained and adapted before we can accept it. In fact, it is not true to St. Paul's teaching. There is a mystery about the resurrection, as there is about all profound truths like sin, suffering, death, salvation. We know in part. But one thing we do know, that the natural body does not rise again. We know it by the three grand avenues of knowledge;—experience, science, and revelation. We know by experience that the organism is dissipated, and cannot become again exactly what it was, after death has laid hands upon it. By science we are taught that disintegration and decay only precede the reorganization of dead mold into other living organisms; so that the identical atoms of one's own body may be built into the house-walls of different persons living centuries apart. And revelation speaks in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians in his familiar illustration of the wheat. Jesus nowhere teaches any such resurrection of the physical body. His own bodily resurrection appears to have been arranged as a testimony, as his death was; and it is doubtful if his risen body was identical in all its properties with the physical body laid in the tomb. There are several suggestions of such difference in the narrative, not altogether overbalanced by the other passages in which he is said to eat and to offer his wounds to the hand of Thomas, to whom eye-sight was enough. But whatever our conclusion regarding that may be, the bodily condition of the risen dead is not a critical item for faith. It would be better if this clause asserted merely the great fact of the resurrection.

In the interests of catholicity and clearness, it seems to me that in thoughtful repetition of these four clauses of the creed we must modify or eliminate them in mind. The cardinal facts of faith are emphasized best by setting them forth alone. Not that these minor clauses con-

tain untruths,—some of them may be true,—but because they are not of sufficient importance to be set in this brief compendium, or else they are too uncertain in their status as part of the Christian thought of the day.

There are some noticeable omissions also in our creed. Facts of faith as important as any stated therein, more so than those I have been discussing, have no place. Strangely enough, they are among the foremost doctrines in the teaching of the Master. Let us notice some of them.

1. God should be named as something more than "Maker of heaven and earth." He is also Sustainer, Governor, King. The thought of God's constant care is vital to the Christian. It was once the fashion to think of him as far away. He appears so in the creed. We must draw him close to us. Some note of his providence and constant activity, present in his world, is needed.

2. Jesus should be proclaimed as our Saviour from sin, as well as our Lord and Son of God. His relation to the Father is far more explicitly stated than his relationship to men. Christ also should be brought nearer to us in the creed. He is not only Son of God, but our Elder Brother. Not only is he our Lord, but our Saviour also. The warfare which first called out this standard has largely failed in its attack. Now we need a banner of peace and love beneath which to enroll mankind.

3. The facts of the life of Jesus are summarized, but no word of their significance is spoken. In our true confession the purpose of that life should appear. His revelation of God, his redemption of men,—these find no place in the Apostles' Creed. Yet they are the two leading and most essential elements of Christian faith.

4. The Holy Ghost is named, but his work is not even suggested. We believe in the presence of Christ on earth through the Holy Spirit. It is universal Christian belief that we dwell in the period of activity of the Spirit. The immanence of God is an article of the old Greek faith which we are reclaiming and emphasizing afresh to our upbuilding. It must be added to our creed, which was too largely Latin in its origin to feel the force of that truth as it swayed the minds of the Greek theologians.

5. The kingdom of God, Christ's greatest thought and purpose, is not even named. The Holy Catholic Church, an organization in and for the kingdom, appears, but that is both less, and in a sense in contrast to it. We are coming to look widely over men and nations, and we see the larger movements of faith and of events. The kingdom of God is one of the grandest creations of the thought of Christ, coming not by observation nor by organization, but little by little everywhere through the subtle, slow, and secret processes of growth. It is the consummation of the partial vision of all the prophets from the first. What Christ so emphasized, his followers must not forget.

6. The life of service in the spirit of Christ is not made a part of the old symbol, because such an addition would be foreign to its life and atmosphere. Yet what is more suited to our credal confessions? It is a

good sign of life in the modern church that there is even a thought of such an addition to the creed which should express in brief the common faith of Christendom.

Throughout this discussion, the writer does not of course presume to suggest any tampering with the ancient creed, which we love and which must continue to the end of time precisely as it is, a monument to an earlier age and an exponent as well of the progress of our faith. It is the embodiment of the convictions, the fears, the assertions of strong men of old. The omissions which we have to make in our thinking concern only such clauses as express doubtful or obsolete dogmas. And the additions which modern faith requires concern almost altogether the human side of faith. Each of them is indicative of the trend of this day toward a practical realization of doctrine in a life modeled upon that of Jesus Christ. With this tendency in mind, the creed has been studied, and these suggestions have been set down. We must find cause for rejoicing that our day is coming nearer to the Master in our feeling after truth, although his life on earth was so much nearer in point of time to that of those worthies who wrote and established the venerable Apostles' Creed.

NEWBURYPORT, MASS.

ALBERT W. HITCHCOCK.