

## The Function of Creeds.

BY THE REV. C. H. K. BOUGHTON,

*Principal of the Clergy College, Ripon.*

A RECENT writer on this subject asks the question, "Is a man saved by his Creed?" and in answer he affirms that it is a common belief among Christians that a man's salvation does not depend upon the correctness of his confession.<sup>1</sup> "The religious Populus does think, with whatever correction by the clerus or its own deeper-minded members, that a man's Creed is the faith which saves him." It hardly needs much argument to prove that such a statement, in any strict interpretation of the words, is fatally false. Not such, at any rate, is the teaching of the New Testament. "Thou believest that God is one: thou doest well: the devils also believe, and shudder." The devils profess a Creed, but St. James was far from holding that it ministered to their salvation. Rather he maintained with St. Paul that the faith which saves a man is something radically different from an inactive otiose assent to a series of statements. It is something which, though it involves the intellect, resides more properly within the spheres of the emotions and the will. Simply expressed, it is a personal confidence in a personal God and Saviour, and a self-despairing committal of the life to Him. Of course the word faith is used with many shades of meaning in the New Testament. Dr. Sanday has distinguished seven in the Epistle to the Romans alone. But the crowning meaning "is personal adhesion, the highest and most effective motive power of which human character is capable."<sup>2</sup>

It is remarkable how strong the tendency has been in Church history to forget this. Perhaps part of the reason is that a conception which seems so simple, so congruous with human nature, is really so high and far-reaching in its con-

<sup>1</sup> Skrine, "Creed and the Creeds," p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Sanday and Headlam, "Romans," p. 34.

sequences as to be difficult of attainment. At least the fact remains that Christians have continually fallen short of it. It was not long before the Early Church began to lay great stress upon orthodox belief. Whatever justification there may have been in the battle against Gnosticism, and there was much, the ever-increasing stress was not without its dangers, and they showed themselves unmistakably in later centuries. The Church of Rome was not without its mystics and its saints, its men of deep true faith, but it is surely painfully clear that, broadly speaking, a Pauline faith was exchanged for a bare intellectual assent. In proof of this it is hardly necessary to do more than refer to the gigantic systems of the scholastic writers, crowned by the all-embracing "Summa Theologiæ." Rebellion against this mistaken emphasis came at the Reformation. It was the truer conception of faith which made the breach with the Papacy possible. "True faith,"<sup>1</sup> says Luther, "cannot be made by our thought, but is purely a work of God in us, without any aid of ours." "When faith is of the kind that God awakens and creates in the heart, then a man trusts in Christ; yea, he is then so firmly founded upon Christ that he bids defiance to sin, death, hell, the devil, and all God's adversaries. . . . That is the nature of true faith, which is utterly unlike the faith of Sophists, Turks and Jews; for their faith simply lights upon a thing with human thoughts, accepts it, and believes that it is thus or so." Similarly Melancthon speaks of the necessity of practically trusting in Christ and experiencing the Spirit's activities, and says that thus "we shall come to know the Trinity better than by disputing with useless speculations on what the Persons of the Trinity do among themselves, not what they do with us."

It is clear, then, from the teaching of the New Testament, supported by the opinion of Luther and other great leaders of spiritual movements in subsequent history, that what saves a man is not his Creed, his assent to intellectual propositions, but his faith, the implicit trust of his whole personality in a living

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mozley, "Ritschlianism," p. 115.

Saviour. Yet it remains true that the intellect is part of the personality, and that the faith must become articulate. It must strive to express to the best of its power the nature of the object upon which it rests, and the consequences of the relationship. Faith must inevitably produce Creeds. At least faith has produced Creeds, and in the New Testament and in the writings of the sub-Apostolic age and of the Early Fathers we see the process steadily advancing to its completion. At the beginning of the Gospel story we see Jesus gathering round Him a small band of followers. He makes no statements about Himself. His favourite self-appellation "Son of Man" is agreed by the best writers to be a vague term, intended to conceal rather than reveal the secret which He Himself knew to lie behind it. He simply says "Follow Me." Impelled by the magnetism of His personality, they followed. They saw His deeds; they heard His discourses. Impression slowly deepened, and reflection began. The process of wonderment which was going on in the minds of all the Galilean crowds was more intense in the minds of the disciples, just because their experiences were deeper. "This man is a prophet." "This man is Elias." The possibilities were pondered, and were found unsatisfactory. Nothing seemed adequate to the facts but "This is the Messiah," and at last the thought burst into speech through the lips of Peter; faith had become articulate; the first Christian Creed had been said.

This is precisely typical of the whole process of early Creed-making. It was always the expression of experience, and it went no further than experience warranted. St. Peter could not in Matthew xvi. have said more than "Thou art the Messiah." (The phrase "Son of God" there means no more than this.) He had seen works which his study of Isaiah lxi. and other passages told him were works of the Messiah, and he spoke as he knew. After the Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension, experience had increased enormously, and hence the intellectual statement of that experience grew both in length and in significance. By the time St. Jude wrote his Epistle there was a "faith which was once for all delivered unto the

saints," and most interpreters are agreed that this refers to a rudimentary Creed. Indeed, here and there throughout the Apostolic writings there are phrases which seem to be fragments of Creeds. Thus in 1 Cor. viii. 6 we have "There is one God the Father, of whom are all things and we unto Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through Him"; in 1 Cor. xv. 3, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and . . . was buried, and . . . rose again according to the Scriptures"; in 1 Tim. iii. 16, "He who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, received up into glory." The result of the process may be given in the words of Harnack, "It is highly probable that a short confession was definitely formulated in the Roman community before the middle of the second century, expressing belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, embracing also the most important facts in the history of Jesus, and mentioning the Holy Church, as well as the two great blessings of Christianity—the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the dead."<sup>1</sup>

This is the substance of our present Apostles' Creed, and if the clauses of that Creed be examined, it will be easily realized how entirely they express either experience or the necessary results of experience. Thus in regard to God, His existence, His fatherhood, and His almighty power had all been proved in the life-history of individual Jews and of the nation as a whole. His description as Creator necessarily follows. In regard to Christ, His Birth, Death, Burial, Resurrection and Ascension fell within the knowledge of the Apostles. His descent into hell is a simple inference which "completes our conception of the Lord's death."<sup>2</sup> This is not affected by the fact that it is peculiar to the West, and appears first in the Creed of Aquileia, about A.D. 390. His session at God's right hand may be partly based on Stephen's vision, partly inferred from Apostolic experience of Christ's victorious power. The future judgment is a direct revelation from Christ. The

<sup>1</sup> "History of Dogma," i. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Westcott, "Historic Faith."

Divinity of our Lord is equally a necessary deduction. One who proved Himself such a Saviour as the Apostles knew Him to be must necessarily be regarded as no other than God, quite apart from any explicit assertions by Himself. The Holy Ghost was known as the Spirit of Jesus, who controlled the affairs of the Infant Church, and directed its leaders as He would. The Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints are but different names for the fellowship of believers from different points of view. The forgiveness of sins was a blessed experience. The eternal life and the resurrection of the body were but expressions for the full development which must be the inevitable crown of the experiences of new life which were being felt in every Christian heart.

Enough has been said to show that with the earliest Christians experience came first, then its expression ; first faith, then a Creed. This is undoubtedly the ideal way, and to a certain extent it must be traversed by every believer in all ages. It is one of the great services of the Ritschlians to have laid stress upon the fact. But just because the Church is a continuous body with a historical succession of members, the later generations can never arrive at their Creed in exactly the same way as the first generation did. It is, indeed, obvious that the clauses dealing with the historic facts of our Lord's life can never become matter of experience at all, but must be received simply upon a tradition which historical criticism proves to be trustworthy. But what of the other clauses? Are they to be simple relics, interesting bygone results of a bygone experience? The Ritschlians tend to answer in the affirmative. Herrmann, for example, only allows that the Christian knowledge of the past should be "put forward as the expression of the inner world in which believers have lived,"<sup>1</sup> so that we may tell Christians "that they, too, will some day grow up to the comprehension of such things, if only each in his special situation exercises a right faith." To adopt this attitude is, however, surely to neglect unduly the existence of the Church. It is to

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mozley, "Ritschlianism," p. 130.

forget that the Church of all ages is the home of the Eternal Spirit, and that whatsoever experiences were wrought by the Spirit in departed Christians are a heritage for the admonition of us upon whom the ends of the world are come. It is to fail to notice a distinction in the attitude to Creed suitable to individuals and to the Church as a body. The Church in one generation has a duty towards the Church in the next. It cannot pass on its experiences; they are incommunicable. But it can and ought to pass on an intellectual statement of the essentials of its experience, and the existence of a Creed is an attempt to fulfil the duty. What, then, are the functions of such a traditional Creed?

Undoubtedly the function which was most prominent in the second century was that of a test of orthodoxy. Irenæus, the champion in the battle with Gnosticism, uses as his great weapon the tradition of the Churches. Whatever teachings are not in harmony with this tradition are to be rejected. Such a usage has its effect upon the tradition itself. It becomes more definite. Irenæus in one place has put together a fairly full Creed. It also becomes more theological, and so we have the development of the Apostles' Creed in those of Nicea and Constantinople, and later still the expansion of particular doctrines in the scholastic phraseology of the Symbol of Athanasius. The theological development is not an unmixed blessing, but it is clear that if a Creed is in any sense to form a standard of belief, it must fairly cover the field of historic fact, and put clearly the essential deductions. This is one reason for regarding as unsatisfactory the Creed recently suggested as a *Formula Concordiæ* by Dr. Denney,<sup>1</sup> "I believe in God, through Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord and Saviour." Dr. Denney means every word of this to be pressed, and those of us who value his writings know that he does not wish to withhold assent from one iota of full Christian belief. But if so, is not his formula so condensed as to be almost unintelligible without much explanation, and is it not better to state the explanation

<sup>1</sup> "Jesus and the Gospel," p. 398.

simply and tersely, as the Apostles' Creed states it? Moreover, without going the length of saying with Mr. Edghill that "Modernists and the broadest Churchmen could unite in assent to such a formula,"<sup>1</sup> one feels that Dr. Denney has not answered his own self-criticism for the omission, for example, of any clause relating to the Holy Ghost.

But this first function of Creed is mainly negative, for use in meeting error. Let us pass to notice a second and positive use, in teaching. In the words of the Rev. C. L. Drawbridge, "There is a period in the development of the child, when its mind can very much more readily learn words than acquire ideas. During this period one teaches it words and phrases, which, at the time, convey little or no meaning. The religious teacher causes the child to learn, let us say, the Creed. The mathematical master teaches his pupil the multiplication table. It is only later on that either collection of words can be translated into the ideas which they are intended to convey. Thus it is necessary to teach mere words. But these words have no use, except in so far as, later on, they are converted into ideas."<sup>2</sup> The application of this principle holds good for those who are children in any subject as well as for those who are literally children in age. Hence it applies to new converts and others who are still going to school with the Church, and it makes no difference who in any particular case stands to the learner *in loco Ecclesie*. It is not that the words which are learnt are entirely meaningless. It is that the learner in the early stages of his education apprehends only a fragment of their meaning. Meanwhile, the words potentially cover a far wider range, and education advances as their content for the learner steadily increases. It was thus that our Lord taught His disciples. We have noticed their first Creed, "Thou art the Messiah." Christ accepted the title, but it became a mere shell. It is hardly too much to say that from the moment of Peter's confession onwards Christ's main work was to remove from the title

<sup>1</sup> "Revelation of the Son of God," p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Training of the Twig," p. 75.

"Messiah" almost all the content which it previously had in the Apostle's mind, and to put into it a new and spiritual meaning, drawn from a wider and deeper study of the real message of the Old Testament. Similarly, too, He adopted the title Son of Man because it was almost meaningless, and He could make it cover all that He represented in the world.

From this point of view, it is interesting to notice the real truth of a phrase which is ascribed to Newman, and which has been quoted with approval in certain quarters: "We repeat the Creeds, not because we believe them, but in order that we may believe them." If this sentence be taken strictly, it is manifestly false. If we do not, for example, accept the truth of the historic facts of our Lord's life, we shall never make ourselves accept them by repeating the Creed. Moreover, no man has a right to repeat the Creed unless he already believes all the articles which it contains. But this is not to say that the meaning which certain clauses have for him does not, and ought not, to expand. To take but one illustration: we should say there was something wrong with a man's spiritual life if "I believe in God" did not mean vastly more for him at forty than at fourteen. A Creed, then, is a form of words which has been chosen by past generations under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to express as adequately as possible the content of their spiritual experience. For any succeeding generation it becomes a series of finger-posts, indicating directions in which men may explore with the sure hope of gaining a similar and sometimes a grander experience. The value of Creed in this connection is realized among the Ritschlians almost alone by Kaftan, who writes: "What holds the Church together and binds its members one to another is, before all else, its faith—its common faith. It is this faith which must be preached, and in this must the youth be instructed. There is no Christian Church which has not such a rule, in accordance with the proclamation and teaching of which it must direct itself; none also in which this rule does not present itself as teaching, and this teaching is its dogma."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Glaube und Dogma," p. 26.

At this point a third function of Creed is suggested. It is a formula binding together the different ages of Church history. "The Christian religion," writes Dr. Sanday, "is a continuous process, and it has had a continuous history; and the Creeds bind together the beginnings of that process with the end."<sup>1</sup> But this at once raises a difficulty. "They represent the principle of identity which runs through all the flux of change. And yet even the Creeds, standing as they do for the principle of identity, are not themselves absolutely exempt from change. They must mean at one time something not quite the same as that which they meant at another—centuries before. They have to be adjusted to different conditions, to a different context of ideas. At the same time, it is their part to emphasize the identity and unity." To some minds, this may appear at first sight a dangerous admission. It seems to reduce the repetition of the Creeds as an expression of common faith to a mere sham. But if we consider the nature of their subject-matter, we shall see that some such admission is necessary. When two persons are speaking about a table which stands before them, the content of the word is probably the same for both. But let them be speaking about a picture in the National Gallery, and we should admit that to the one who was an artist the word "picture" connoted far more than it did to the other who was not. This difference in meaning becomes more marked in the field of religion. All language about its ultimate truths must be inadequate and in part symbolic. Now, if this be true in the case of men who are contemporaries, it is still more true of those who are separated by long intervals of time and by the wellnigh impassable gulf of different intellectual environment. Old phraseology cannot but modify in some degree its meaning. This is particularly so with some of the most symbolic clauses of the Creed. There have been those who have interpreted the Ascension and the Session of Christ in a crude, materialistic way. Most thoughtful men would prefer now to be more reticent; to think of the Ascension rather under the Johannine

<sup>1</sup> H. S. Holland, "Miracles," p. 2.

figure of a concealment from human view ; to regard the Session as a symbol of triumphant rest. The case is similar with the resurrection of the body. The Latin here speaks of the flesh, and it can hardly be doubted that this too has frequently been taken literally. Indeed, a literal interpretation might be defended on the ground of the statement in St. Luke: "A spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have." To us, however, it appears that such a statement needs to be read in the light of others, lest it be misunderstood. We are not uninfluenced by reflections on the mysterious character of our Lord's appearances during the forty days and on St. Paul's distinction between a natural and spiritual body. Therefore, while we still retain the phrase "resurrection of the body," we use the word "body" in a symbolic sense. What we confess is our belief in the survival of the whole personality through death. We hold that if soul survives, then it must have some mode of expression, some medium of communication, as suitable to the new conditions as the present body is to the old. But thus to modify the meaning is not to be guilty of juggling with the Creed. We are true to the spirit, and that is the essential point. The statement of the resurrection of the flesh was the way in which Roman Christians expressed, to the best of their power, St. Paul's great doctrine. We go back behind the Credal clause to its New Testament foundation, and who shall say that we moderns are not nearer to St. Paul's meaning than our forefathers of a more materialistic age? At any rate, we do not hesitate to take the old phrases to ourselves, and repeat them with a clear conscience. The identity is far greater than the difference. Thus Creed becomes the great link with the historic past. It stands as a witness to the continuity of the Church. It forces home upon us the too often forgotten truth of the eternal fellowship of the saints. It inspires us with courage by reminding us of the battles they so nobly fought and won.

There is one more function which can be noticed in this article. The Creeds are used in public worship. How soon

they began to be so used is unknown. But it is certain that Peter, Bishop of Antioch, in A.D. 488 ordered the Creed to be recited at every meeting of the congregation. Timotheus followed his example at Constantinople in A.D. 512, and the practice was adopted at the Spanish Council of Toledo in A.D. 589. Now, we said at the outset that Creed must be the product of faith. A creed as an intellectual statement can never produce a saving faith. Nevertheless, Creed can minister to an existing faith, and so to life. Faith is a response of the whole man to the Divine, but the fruits of that response in conduct and character depend largely upon the man's conception of the Divine. The more worthy the conception, the better will be the response of the soul and the answering touch of God upon it. There is a fallacy in Pope's oft-quoted saying that it does not matter what a man believes. Conduct does depend upon belief. As Thomas Carlyle put it: "When belief waxes uncertain, practice becomes unsound." Faith, we repeat, is the movement of the soul which God answers by contact, and in the contact there is life. A Creed as "a declaration of personal trust and allegiance is in reality a high form of worship; to recite a Creed is no barren and dry test of orthodoxy; it is a loving outburst of a loyal heart."<sup>1</sup> "When a believer recites a Creed, either he does nothing at all or he offers by help of the words a sacrifice to the Creator of his whole personality, thought, emotion, conduct together. . . . Thus Creed is the instrument of salvation, by enabling the believer's act of self-surrender, which is half the act of life. If the Divine makes response by giving itself to the man . . . then the reciprocation has happened, and the man has life."<sup>2</sup> These modern writers are but repeating in new forms an old thought. St. Paul told the Roman Christians, "With the mouth confession is made unto salvation," and St. Augustine wrote, "What is it to believe in God? It is by believing to love, by believing to have affec-

<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, "Foundations of the Creed," p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Skrine, "Creed and the Creeds," p. 197.

tion, by believing to pass into Him and to be incorporated in His members."

Nothing short of this act of winning life more abundant by repeated sacrifice takes place ideally at every repetition of the Creed. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are splendidly adapted for the purpose. As expressed in the singular number, they have all the advantages of a personal confession; as recited in the congregation, they share all the benefits of the Communion of Saints. The same cannot be said of the Symbol of Athanasius; it is not a direct confession, but an impersonal statement; and its terminology is too much that of an antiquated philosophy. It can only minister to life for those whose knowledge of its historical setting and real significance is greater than that possessed by the average congregation.

The Church of England takes her stand on the historic Creeds. They are not perfect. The language is occasionally obscure, and perhaps some could wish the meaning here and there otherwise expressed. That is but to say that they are productions of men who attempted to express the mysteries of God. Yet they remain a cherished possession, and deserve the prominent place assigned to them in the Prayer-Book.

