Reformation & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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INTRODUCTION

John H. Armstrong

Christianity is, first and foremost, a historical religion. It changes hearts, for sure. And it powerfully transforms lives. But it began in real history. And it grows and reforms in real history as well. The Apostle puts it this way: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, NRSV).

Though my observations may seem self-evident, I am convinced many modern Christians think and live in ways that practically deny the historicity of their faith every day. And their churches and pastors feed this deception. Modern faith seems to have almost nothing to do with the church historically, especially the early church.

The most common mistake of all, at least the mistake made by evangelical Christians, is to act as if nothing really important happened *after* the death of the apostles until sometime in the sixteenth century. (Many are not even sure much good happened in the sixteenth century!)

The need for theology, for creeds, and for careful consideration of the practices of the early church, all arise from what the late John Leith called the "two basic facts." First, man is an intelligent and thinking being. Anselm said the Christian needed "to learn to discern with agonizing clarity

what is conceivable by him and about God himself."[1] Second, Leith noted, Christian faith holds that God is both *the truth* and *the source* of all truth. "If God is to be known and served, he must be known and served with the mind as well as with the heart and will."[2]

The most basic confession of the early church in the New Testament is: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11). But when faced with heresy, schism and Christ-denying error on every hand, the early church said much more. Creeds followed, making the faith plain and simple for all to hear and follow. Congregations learned from one another and worshiped within the parameters of the most holy catholic faith. Vincent of Lerins (died before A.D. 450) put this simply, in a famous line often cited: "In the Catholic church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." The church father Tertullian (A.D. 160-230) underscored the prominence that should be given to the post-apostolic churches when he wrote: "It is evident that all doctrine which agrees with those apostolic churches, *the wombs and origins of the faith*, must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God."

The arrogance of modern Christianity, cut off so radically from the faith of the early church, is actually quite astounding. We think and act as if we were the first, or at least the second, generation to understand the faith *since* the death of the aged apostle John on the isolated island of Patmos. We go from one fad and craze to the next, aping our popular culture, seeking to be "trendier than thou." We cut ourselves off from both the spirit and doctrine of almost all Christians down through the ages, *including* the magisterial Protestant Reformers. Come to think of it, we have even distorted a great deal from the Reformers that is of immense importance.

We can regain a good deal of what was lost by putting the subject of the early church back into our theology and practice. (When was the last time your pastor made *any reference at all* to the early church?) For sure, there is not a *single* strand of

early church catholicity, but strands. But there is an essential unity that is very substantial. It is my conviction that the wise Christian, who longs for the renewal of the church, will drink more and more from these classical wells. The beginning place will always be the one Bible that all Christians honor as the Word of God. We rightly follow this commitment with a common understanding that there are two testaments, recognizing both their unity and diversity. Then we follow these two with a commitment to the three great catholic creeds: e.g. the Apostles' Creed (c. A.D. 150), the Nicene Creed (A.D. 326), and the Athanasian Creed (A.D. 428). Four historic councils will further unite us in what we can properly call orthodoxy: e.g. First Nicea (A.D. 325), First Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Finally, when we speak of the early church, we can all agree to pay particular attention to the first five centuries, from the Apostolic era to the end of the fifth century (approximately A.D. 400). Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant believers all have a common beginning place in these centuries, in these creeds and these councils. We begin here, with the nature and work of Christ and the doctrine of God's triunity. We do not have a great deal of hope for reforming modern Protestant churches until we rediscover this classical foundation, with its emphasis upon Christ above all.

Notes

1. John H. Leith, editor. *Creeds of the Church* (John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1963), 1.
2. *Creeds*, 2.

The creed is simply the church's understanding of the meaning of Scripture. Here is how the church reads and receives Scripture. . . . Creeds are signposts to heresies. The task of the creed was to defend the church against heresy. The creed has the negative role of shutting the heretic out and setting the boundaries within which authentic Christian theology and life can take place. . . . Yet it is a mistake to attribute creeds simply to heresy, for there would be creeds even if there were no heretics. . . . Creeds are also a standard, a battle cry, a testimony and witness to the world.

JOHN LEITH (1963)

The Blessed Apostle John distinguished no heresy or schism, neither did he set down any as specially separated; but he called all who had gone out from the church, and who acted in opposition to the church, antichrist.

CYPRIAN, *EPISTLES*

Theme Articles