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CREEDS: RELICS OR RELEVANT?

by Thomas Cornman

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What might the word “creed” bring to your mind? For some who might prefer the term “statement of faith,” the word suggests a liturgical religious tradition. From a secular perspective, it could represent a deeply held guiding belief. For many who claim the name of Christ, a creed (from the Latin *credo*, “I believe”) is the framework of shared beliefs derived from Scripture and around which we unite with other Christians. The history of the Christian church is replete with vigorous debate over what should be included in our core beliefs. Indeed, the creeds or confessions of faith have been a means both to test orthodoxy and by which to pass on our faith.

For much of post-Reformation history, faith traditions developed a single understanding of how churches and individuals know and codify core beliefs. Some, such as the Pietists of the late-seventeenth century, believed that the Holy Spirit communicates truth directly to the individual and this truth is known intuitively. Other traditions, such as seventeenth-century post-English Reformation Presbyterianism developed a substantial creed that addressed theological points from major to minor. For these Christians, religious knowledge was based on knowing and owning the confession of faith that had been established by their pastors and scholars. For others, religious knowledge was understood rationally. It was self-evident. Christianity was perceived as a reasonable religion based on the unfettered use of the mind to understand what God is like, how to know Him, and what He expects of His followers.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, American evangelicals began to weave together experience, reason, and creed as a three-strand cord of religious knowledge. For many groups, these three strands were of equal importance.

Over time, the importance of a creed began to fade as reliance on experience and reason increased in the mid-twentieth century. Since then, even reason has begun to wane in favor of experience.

Many conservative churches are deeply committed to the Bible alone as their creed. According to Carl Trueman, even churches that eschew the use of written creeds still use oral and *ad hoc* creeds that cannot be reviewed and evaluated as can the established creeds of many faith traditions.¹

Unifying creeds are introduced in Scripture as a way for the people of God to understand Him and our relationship with Him. Luke Timothy Johnson argues that the first of the creeds is the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”² These creed structures continue into the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 8:6 (ESV), Paul inserts an early credal formula based largely on Deuteronomy 6:4. “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” These early credal formulae of Scripture are followed by more fully developed creeds during the centuries of Christian history. Why do we find this reliance on the creeds in the early church?

Creeds were born in a largely illiterate and oral culture. Orthodoxy (right teaching) was preserved through the memorization and transmission of the creed. In an illiterate world with a plethora of itinerant preachers, the faithful needed to know whom they should listen to relative to the things of God. The creed gave them the ability to sort out the orthodox from the heterodox (different teaching). When an itinerant teacher claimed to represent God, the faithful would ask the wandering preacher to recite the creed. His version of the creed would immediately reveal his brand of faith and allow the faithful to determine whether or not they should listen to him.

One of the early church’s most significant creeds is the Apostles’ or Old Roman Creed. Thought to be of apostolic origin, it likely originated in the fourth century, although much of it is rooted in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian from the end of the second century.³ It served as a guiding statement of orthodoxy meant to preserve the faith, was used as a teaching tool to instruct Christians in the essentials of the faith, and became a statement of belief for those who were being accepted into the church through baptism.⁴

While there are minor variations in the Apostles' Creed, most accept a standard reading:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell.⁵

The third day He rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.⁶

The Apostles' Creed echoes the doctrines found in Scripture and defines the core beliefs of the ancient church. It is both Trinitarian and Christocentric. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and His future role as judge are not debated. The future of the believer is clearly stated. For some early church leaders, this statement became known as the Rule of Faith. It was the rule in the sense of a *measure or standard*.⁷

By the beginning of the fourth century, the church began to debate the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Was Christ fully God? Was He God-like? Rancorous debate over these questions led to the first major churchwide or ecumenical council, which met at Nicea. At stake was whether

Christ was of the same essence as the Father, a question that had not been answered in the Apostles' Creed and was now threatening to divide the church.

The Council concluded that right teaching needed to be defined in a new creed that left no doubt about the nature of Jesus Christ in relation to the Father. In order to be sufficiently specific, the council included nonbiblical language in a creed for the first time. In addition to restating all of the elements from the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed added specific safeguards concerning Jesus Christ's full and complete deity.

We believe...in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation

*came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead.*⁸

But the Nicene Creed did not end the controversy over the nature of Jesus Christ or His relationship with God the Father, and it was later amended in response to subsequent controversies. It was a clear response to specific and growing threats, and became the standard by which clergy were judged to be able to preach on behalf of the church.

Three later councils addressed concerns about an orthodox doctrine of Christ. The Council of Constantinople was held (AD 381) to resolve a question about the humanity of Christ. It resulted in a modification of the Nicene Creed and provided the church with what is now regarded as its most common reading. The Council at Ephesus (AD 431) met to determine the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ, but did not result in a new creed. The church gathered at Chalcedon (AD 451) to wrestle once more with the doctrine of Christ and produced the Definition of Chalcedon:

*Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This self-same one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this self-same one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul [meaning human soul] and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is Godbearer in respect of his humanness. We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality [hypostasis]. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word [Logos] of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers [the Nicene Creed] has handed down to us.*⁹

The church continued to struggle with doctrinal differences, the most significant of which resulted in the East–West division of AD 1054. The theological concerns centered on the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, while practical issues

included the marriage of priests and which elements of communion would be served to the laity.

The great theological struggles of the Reformation resulted in the creation of new creeds, with each emerging Protestant group crafting a creed to express the specifics of their new understanding of Scripture, usually in contrast to the positions of the Roman Catholic Church. The earliest was the Augsburg Confession of Philip Melanchthon, who represented the German princes aligned with Martin Luther. This confession served as a political statement, a theological statement, and an identity statement of the Lutheran churches of Germany. It included a key theological statement concerning justification in Article IV:

Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4.¹⁰

“They” refers to the German Lutheran churches to which the princes belonged. This section of the Augsburg Confession reveals one of the *solas* of the Reformation: *by faith alone*. We also see the key elements of Christ’s satisfaction for sin and the imputation of His righteousness. Multiple other Reformation creeds were careful attempts to define theology both positively – *this is what we believe* – and negatively – *this is what we do not believe*.

Are the creeds of the past simply relics, or do they continue to serve the church and help it maintain a firm footing in orthodoxy? As biblical literacy wanes, the use of a creed, confession, or statement of faith may be even more useful for defining the Christian’s identity and safeguarding the church from error, as long as that creed is rooted in God’s Word. Orthodox creeds are a means of testing those who wish to speak for the church concerning theology and practice. Historically they have served to summarize and clarify the core concepts found in Scripture. Their refinement and affirmation by the councils of the early church and by believers in the intervening centuries stand as a link to the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Creeds continue to be written and refined by Christian communities who seek to provide contemporary statements of orthodox belief and establish their specific identities within the spectrum of Christian belief.

Thomas Cornman, PhD, is dean of Trinity College and Graduate School and vice president for academic administration at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois.

NOTES

- 1 Carl A. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 16.
- 2 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday 2003), 11, 12.
- 3 Herbert Thurston, "Apostles' Creed," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01629a.htm>.
- 4 David Meager, "A Brief History of the Three Creeds," *CrossWay* 93 (Summer 2004); available at Churchsociety.org.
- 5 For discussion concerning this controversial clause, see Hank Hanegraaff, "Why Does the Apostles' Creed Say That Jesus 'Descended into Hell?'" in this issue of the *Journal*, p. 62.
- 6 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 21, 22.
- 7 Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 89–92.
- 8 Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 27, 28.
- 9 "Definition of Chalcedon," <http://creeds.net/ancient/chalcedon.htm>.
- 10 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 10.