

TITLE:

The role of creeds today

- A The value of the Creeds depends on the nature of the faith.*
- B The Creeds embody universally accepted core truths.*
- C Should we write new Creeds?*
- D Doing without the Creeds?*

A The value of the Creeds depends on the nature of the faith.

The crux of the question about the need for the historic Creeds is the nature of Christian faith. If, as some voices in the Church suggest, Christianity is essentially a cultural expression of universal human aspirations, then ancient creeds are only of antiquarian interest, for their cultural setting has long gone. Any modern creed would be at best a summary of current subcultural suppositions, and would probably tend more towards a statement of personal prejudices. On this view not only the ancient Creeds, but the very concept of Creeds, are of little value, except to those who believe the present age holds the last word on truth.

If however, Christian doctrine is "*the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*" (Jude .3), then the Creeds have to do with universal truth. They might perhaps, because of their own cultural origins, be found to contain error. There might be matters of contemporary importance on which they are silent, and their modes of expression might be better suited to previous cultures. But if the revelation of doctrine is completed, rather than progressive, then they still handle eternal truths.

There is no doubt that the Bible itself takes the latter view of faith (Galatians 1.8-9).

B The Creeds embody universally accepted core truths.

The early Church also took such a view of doctrine. What the Fathers wrote was to clarify, and not to change, the Apostolic (Biblical) revelation. Although they might have been influenced by contemporary philosophical concepts, their sole authority was that of the Old and New Testaments, embodying the Prophetic revelation.

They particularly wrote in response to erroneous views. These errors involved cardinal doctrines like the nature of God, and of Christ, and of salvation. And so it was on these central matters that the Creeds were formulated, and then endorsed by the whole body of the Church.

Negatively, then, to reject the Creeds is to say either that the entire ancient Church misunderstood the faith, or that the faith itself has changed. Positively, to affirm them is to identify with the patristic Church and its faith, in keeping with Jesus' prayer in John 17.20-26. So if the Creeds were originally necessary to summarise, clarify and defend the "*good deposit*" of the faith, then they are equally needed today.

C Should we write new Creeds?

The Creeds are often thought irrelevant by ordinary Christians today. But this is more from ignorance of the importance of what they teach, and difficulty in understanding them, than from a considered change of theological agenda. What is needed is not so much new Creeds as education in the use of the old. In point of fact, the patterns of thought in the Creeds are not dissimilar to our own. Our society has inherited the Greek intellectual method. We would find it far harder to use the Creeds were we from India or China.

Perhaps the "Greek" background which makes the Creeds approachable to westerners is the one thing which, of itself, warrants their modification. Patristic theology tended to depart from the rather Semitic thought-forms of the Scripture-writers, resulting in a more static, intellectual expression of doctrine. Modern ideas, such as the concept of "substance" as more what God *does* than what he *is*, are in effect a rediscovery of some of this Jewish heritage. This must be of value.

Apart from this, the Creeds are more in need of explanation than of re-writing. Education today is far more practical, and less logical, than it once was. So modern Christians need careful teaching about the reasoning of the Creeds, when they are used in the typical situations of nurturing, baptism and worship. The Eastern Church's recognition of the practical demands of Credal faith is a valuable insight, and should find ready acceptance by those whose education has encouraged participation more than contemplation, and whose churches teach the ministry of all believers. Yet the intellectual aspect of faith is just as Biblical as the practical, and needs to be given due emphasis in a "post-intellectual" age.

In the light of this, there seems no valid reason to replace the historic Creeds. However, statements of faith serve many different purposes. The Creeds are "catholic" statements of faith, uniting the whole Church. But churches have found the need for more detailed summaries to

govern their own life and discipline, such as the 39 articles of the Church of England, or the exhaustive Westminster Confession of the Reformed churches.

My own church, reflecting its Brethren origins, has a statement of faith emphasising the doctrines of sin and salvation, as well as having clauses showing our position on current important controversies. Other organisations have statements of faith stressing matters relevant to their activities, such as the Christian Medical Fellowship's summary of Biblical teaching on the value of the individual.

D Doing without the Creeds?

All these are of value in themselves, but none of them obviates the need for the historic Creeds, which cannot be re-written because they *are* historic, rooting the Church of today into Christ's People of all ages and places.

The feeling of some that the Creeds detract from true Christianity results from either misunderstanding or rejection of Apostolic doctrine. Their development shows that they did not create dogma, but crystallise it. They "*may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture*" (Article VIII, C of E).

Those who are most vehement against the Creeds also wish to reject, or misinterpret, the Scriptures on which they are based. For this reason alone, the Creeds are valuable. But in addition, the Creeds help protect us from the threat of the doctrinal traps which troubled former ages. Even if we could manage without them, as the Church originally did, they would need to be re-invented as old problems recurred. "*Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it*" (George Santayana). "*Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.*" (Hebrews 13.7-8).

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