

TITLE:

- 1. Why did the early Church feel it was important to set out the clearly-defined “confessions” or statements of faith, found in the early creeds?**
- 2. Does this imply that we need to be doing a similar process today?**

1

*The apostolic kerygma*

Analysis of the New Testament suggests that from the start certain doctrines (the so-called “*kerygma*” first identified by C H Dodd) were at the core of apostolic teaching. This core was always “Trinitarian”, in the sense that it stressed the Fatherhood and Creatorhood of God, the Person and work of Jesus as his incarnate Son, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, although of course the doctrine of the Trinity itself was only developed much later. The *kerygma* is scattered through the canonical writings, but especially in the sermons of Acts. It does not, however, seem to have had a fixed verbal form, and different aspects were stressed in different circumstances. It is reasonable to suppose that a similar pattern of preaching continued in the post-apostolic period.

*Baptismal confessions*

The New Testament also contains hints of such “Trinitarian” teaching particularly associated with baptism (*eg Matthew 28.19*) and worship (*eg Philippians 2.5-11*, which seems to be an early hymn). By the mid-second century, as Justin Martyr records (*1st Apology ch61*), candidates were generally being baptised in the threefold Name, confessing their faith in each of the Three in turn. Early in the third Hippolytus testifies (*Apostolic Tradition ch21*) that candidates were being required to respond to longer questions containing confessions quite similar to our creeds.

The reasons for such progressive elaboration of the baptismal responses lie partly in the developing practice of catechising candidates in essential doctrine before baptism. The questions would thus summarise their instruction, and their responses demonstrate their acceptance of it. But in addition to this didactic function, it became necessary to safeguard apostolic doctrine from the infiltration of heretical teachers, particularly the docetism of Cerinthus and others in apostolic times, which led to the gnosticism of the second and third centuries. All the gnostic systems, and also the Monarchian heresies of Theodotus, Sabellius and others, denied this received concept of the threefold Godhead. Thus the baptismal confessions helped preserve orthodoxy in the Church.

*Apologetics and Persecution*

Outside the liturgical context, the second century was the era of the early Christian apologists, who sought to justify the faith to a sceptical pagan world. To them too a summary of key doctrines was useful in disabusing their critics of their false notions about Christian teaching.

One upshot of the contest with paganism was that there were repeated waves of persecution, and for those brought before the courts their baptismal confession was also a good basis for witnessing to their faith, as the example of Justin Martyr recorded in the anonymous *Martyrdom of Justin et al.*, (*ch1*) shows.

*Exorcism*

A final context for “credal” confessions, surprising to modern ears, was the exorcism of demons. The apologists (*eg Justin, 2nd Apology ch26; Tertullian, Apology ch23; Origen, Contra Celsum I.6*) record the power of exorcism in the name of Christ as an evangelistic tool. As a testimony to the people (if not as a reminder to the demons!) of the gospel associated with such a powerful Name, Christians came to attach the confessional doctrines to their formulae of exorcism.

*The Rule of Faith*

In the second century, it was enough that the basis of such “confessions”, in whatever context they were employed, was the tradition of the apostolically-founded churches. Both Irenæus and Tertullian make mention of such a tradition, which they call “*the Rule of Faith*”, as the touchstone of sound doctrine. But as time progressed the church became more dispersed and heresies multiplied, sometimes involving whole churches or whole areas in heterodoxy. Under such circumstances the appeal to universal tradition became less convincing, and the need to define central truths more carefully became greater.

*The origin of creeds*

For this reason, by the third and fourth centuries local bishops were summarising their entire catechetical teaching in a single statement, or *creed*, to be learned by the candidates and recited before their baptism. Such creeds might also be used in worship to refresh the church’s

memory and protect it from heretical influences. No doubt such local confessions were greatly influenced by each other, since despite the lack of centralised authority, communications were good between the churches. But the creeds of the great apostolic churches were particularly respected, and indeed the earliest example we have is the *Old Roman Creed*, known in Latin from the turn of the fourth century but probably extant in Greek up to a century earlier.

*Creeds as tests of orthodoxy*

By the fourth century, such creeds had acquired another *raison d'être*. The greatest enemy was now heresy of a more powerful and sophisticated kind, which nevertheless still challenged the Church's teaching on the Trinity (which had still not been definitively stated, and so was susceptible to attack). The followers of Arius had even succeeded in dividing the Church, and winning over the Imperial party to their cause. Under such circumstances it sometimes became necessary to test the beliefs of individuals against an orthodox standard. For this purpose, a carefully-worded creed was ideal, and was so used for example in the case of Marcellus of Ancyra in 339 (Epiphanius, *Haer.*, ch72).

As the doctrinal debates sharpened, so the limitations of the primitive creeds revealed themselves. Unorthodox teachers could assent to the wording of the creed whilst diverging widely in their beliefs from its true intent. Later creeds, such as the *Apostles' Creed*, which are clearly derived from the Old Roman, have more detailed and careful wording. Although this is partly to increase their usefulness as teaching-aids within the church, the main intention is to close the mesh of the net against heresy.

Thus confessions which began as simple affirmations of faith, to be used primarily at baptism, had become by the fourth century, through the challenge of heresy, elaborate summaries of the doctrine of the catholic Church.

2

*The situation today*

At all stages in the development of the creeds, and in all contexts, the early Church made two underlying assumptions. The first was that doctrine is important. The second was that this doctrine should agree with that of the Apostles, those commissioned by Jesus himself. Without these principles the historic creeds have no meaning.

Much Christianity today has a very low view of doctrine of any kind, whether it is the subjective religion of some Quakers and Charismatics, the comfortable respectability of the Broad Church, or even the "simple faith", divorced from theological reflection, seen in too much Evangelicalism.

As for apostolicity, its central importance is also demeaned across the board. The Liberal Church, ever seeking the Holy Grail of contemporary relevance, is outspokenly dismissive of Scriptural doctrine. The Catholic Church, ostensibly dependant on the Apostles' tradition, in practice elevates the current thinking of its hierarchy above their teaching. Even Evangelicalism has begun to see the teaching of the Apostles, and Christ himself, as "culturally conditioned", and therefore subject to modification on even quite fundamental issues.

But to those who share these two principles, the traditional confessions still embody the core of Christian truth. In the face of new challenges, additional refinements might be made (as the Apostles' creed modified the Old Roman), and new contexts might affect the actual form of the confessions. But the fruit of the process carried out by the early Church is universally valid and does not need to be repeated. §§§

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