

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Uses and Authority of a 'Liturgical' Creed or Confession of Faith

There are a variety of ways in which creeds or confessions of faith may be distinguished one from the other. The distinction largely depends on the use to which a creed or confession of faith is put and the nature of the authority attributed to it. We may distinguish, for example, between a 'liturgical' confession, on the one hand, and a 'constitutional' confession, on the other. The titles are drawn primarily from use, the one being a kind of confession suited to the public worship of God, and the other a confession used as a normative criterion for authentic believing. Of course one and the selfsame confession of faith might serve both purposes, and therefore be conceded the kind of authority appropriate to each. Nevertheless, for historical, theological, and practical reasons we find it important to distinguish between the respective uses and authority of the two types of creed or confession. And we believe that the distinction should be kept in mind when a church attempts today to produce modern creeds or confessions of faith. This essay is primarily about a 'liturgical' creed or confession of faith.

I The Uses of a 'Liturgical' Creed or Confession of Faith

1 Doxology

It seems altogether fitting to give pride of place to the use of a creed in the liturgy as a corporate act of praise. The church has need of a confession of faith as an integral part of the public worship of God, and in particular as a glad and joyous declaration of what the church has heard as the gospel of God. It is true that faith finds utterance in hymns of praise and in prayers of thanksgiving, which are a response to what God has made known in his word. But in the communal act of confession, through the use of a creed that sums up and states what is central and essential to the gospel of the self-revealing God, a unique opportunity is given to say back to God and before man what the church has heard God say to her. And if the word that is spoken is gospel, how can the response be other than praise? Moreover, the corporate confession of faith, in joyous response to the good news heard and believed by the church, gives an opportunity to the believing community to commit itself in trust to the God who is believed. The *Credo* is not simply, or even primarily, a statement of *things* that are believed. It is rather an act of grateful, humble commitment to the God who, announcing who he is by what he does, calls forth faith in men. Faith means trust, on the basis of credibility, not credulity. The confession of faith is an act of joyous commit-

ment into the hands of God who is as he has shown himself to be in his saving acts. So the confession of faith of which we are speaking here is a saying back to God, in the shorthand of the creed, what is believed concerning those acts of his whereby he has achieved for us our eternal good – and a saying of it in confidence and joy.

2 *Hermeneutic Guide*

If we were asked how preaching and creed are related in the liturgy of the church, we would have to answer, on the basis of what was said above, that preaching leads to creedal confession. When the preaching of the word of God becomes a true occasion for hearing the word of God, the response of faith that is confession is spontaneously called forth. But now we must also say that the creedal confession does not only *follow* preaching as one of the modes of response to its effective exercise. The creedal confession is also in some sense *prior* to preaching, and serves it as hermeneutic guide. Certainly this has been the function of that pre-eminent and classical creed of the sort we are examining here, the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed (if not the exclusive, yet certainly the normative form of the confession we have in mind) is the short summary of the gospel, of which we spoke in our opening paragraph, that in few words seeks to set forth the essence of the faith in its integrity. As such it is useful as a hermeneutic guide to the interpretation of Scripture as a whole. The need is always present, even if not always recognized, for a central principle of interpretation as we confront the Bible with all the multiformity and complexity of its various writings. Or, to put it perhaps more dynamically, and less ideologically, the Apostles' Creed provides the key to understanding what the whole of Scripture is mainly about. It states in bold, stark outline the main shape of the good news about God that the Scriptures fill out in greater detail and from a variety of perspectives. Thus we locate the woods before we examine the trees, and know where we are in the perspective of God.

To return to the question of preaching and its relation to the creed, the creed provides the minister of the word with an orientation toward the Scriptures that will help to ensure that, in the unfolding of its meaning as word of God for men, he will treat it in terms of that essence or core of the gospel which the creed as confession makes known. The church, in formulating its creed, bears believing witness to what it has heard as the gospel of God, set forth in shorthand form. Then this confession of its faith in turn readies it for a renewed listening and hearing, in hopeful expectation that what was once heard and rejoiced in as the essence of the gospel will be heard again and again in the preaching of God's word.

3 *Ecumenical Instrument*

The creedal confession of faith, of the type we are thinking about here, should serve to preserve and foster the unity of the church. Without at the moment attempting to settle the question whether the Apostles' Creed is the only instrument that will appropriately serve all the purposes we can think of

for a creed, or whether there might not be others of the same sort that could fulfil all the essential functions, we can perhaps agree that a useful function of a creed of the kind we have in mind is to serve the unity of the church. The church is the creature and servant, not of many gospels, but of the one gospel of the self-revealed God. And if it is indeed that one gospel that, being heard, calls forth a confession of faith which echoes it in joy and confidence and self-commitment, then there must be a unity of confession in the credal response of the church to the gospel. Such a recognition on the part of all churches, that the church's response to the essence of the gospel is *one* in meaning and intent, creates a sense of unity transcending all differences. It may be true that, in some sense, the church *is* one in faith even if not in doctrine – if by faith we mean a hearing and responding to the core of the gospel, and by doctrine the detailed exposition of what is believed, in relation to problems arising out of the historical diversification of man's life in time. Nevertheless, we should greatly prize the recognition and experience of the reality of unity inherent in a common witness to faith. Historically – for Western Christendom, at any rate – this function of the creed has been fulfilled by the Apostles' Creed. We seriously raise the question whether any other can take its place in this regard.

Moreover, credal confession is not only an ecumenical instrument in preserving and fostering the unity of the whole church; it also preserves and fosters unity within a particular denomination or congregation of the church. The historical continuity of one generation with the other is strengthened by the common use of a confession of faith which links yesterday with today. Surely, along with other media in the church, this one also can bear witness in its own way that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. There must indeed be ways of clothing the eternal truth in contemporary dress, and thus making it sound fresh and alive and meaningful in the language of today. But there must also be ways of showing that it is the faith of our fathers that lives still – for there *is* a gospel once delivered to the saints. A confession of faith, which at least in its liturgical expression has something like permanence, perhaps in form as well as in content, can be for the church an effective instrument of Christian initiation and education, linking the generations in time as members of one body which confesses one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

4 *Instrument in Aid of Mission*

In confessing its faith, the church prepares for its mission in the world. Indeed, its confession of faith is in itself a performance of mission in the world, for God wills to be glorified in the midst of life both in word and in deed. In the early history of the church, as in the biblical witness itself, confession and martyrdom are closely linked. As Christ made a good confession before Pilate, so Christians are called to make a good confession before all men. The content of that confession is the kingship of Christ over all. But the Christian's personal confession is rooted in the confession of the

community to which he belongs. To the church as a whole belongs the responsibility of making corporate confession in the world – in word as well as in deed. The confession of faith is like a battle-cry uttered by the church, not against men as such, but against that in their existence which defies the judgment inherent in the grace of God. Or – and such a paradox is not foreign to the things that belong to faith – the confession of faith on the part of the church facing outward toward the world may be regarded as an appeal: a call to accept the good news of the gospel, to which the confession points. Why should not the confession of faith be regarded as one of the candlesticks of the Lord, whereby light is shed on the darkened disorder of the world and on the path which leads to a future with promise out of the night of despair. To confess faith is to be strengthened in faith. A confession of faith allows us to make confession directly and deliberately, and not simply indirectly as in the singing of hymns and the saying of prayers.

II *The Authority of a 'Liturgical' Creed or Confession of Faith*

In the foregoing discussion of the uses of the creed, we have found little occasion for emphasizing its normative function. This aspect of the subject has not, of course, been entirely lacking. But our interest has been focussed on the *efficacious use* of a creed rather than on its authority as norm. In other words, we have been concerned to show how the creed that really serves the gospel in the ways suggested possesses *dynamis*, and not simply (or even mainly) *exousia*. The creed shares in the power of God in so far as it is called into being and shaped by the living word of the gospel which God speaks in the church. Therefore, in all its functions the creed is a living thing, partaking of that authority which inheres in reality and truth, in so far as it is held in intimate relation to the life that flows from God's presence in the church in word and sacrament, through the Spirit that enlivens even these. 'In the *Credo* the Church bows before the God whom we do not seek and find – who rather has sought and found us.' The authority of the creed is therefore, in the first instance, an authority borrowed from the voice which it echoes. It pertains much more to creeds or confessions of faith of the second type mentioned above to function constitutionally in the church as a norm of faith. Indeed creeds of the latter kind are called into being to perform this very service. They seek to establish boundary lines between true and false believing. Creeds of the first type do indeed also serve indirectly in this way, as our description of their use has shown. But their chief characteristic is derived from gospel rather than from law.

This distinction must affect the way in which we discuss the question of the creed's authority. For to have an authority which is more than formal and constitutional, a creed must meet a pragmatic test. Does it fulfil, or can it fulfil, the purposes which it is intended to serve?

As doxological instrument the creed will have power to perform its function only in so far as the essence of the gospel sounds forth authentically in it.

It will lack authority in so far as it shifts the centre of the people's praise from grace to law, or from God's word and work to man's. Moreover, if the creed's authority resides, not merely in a formal attribute of normativeness, but also in a lively power to perform its purpose, the will to praise must be quickened again and again in the believing community by the proclamation of the gospel, which the creed will echo as the valley echoes the mountain-reflected human voice.

As hermeneutical instrument the creed will have power to effect its purpose only in so far as it does indeed contain a true formulation of the essential core of true believing. At this point a normative question must be asked. How adequately does the creed reflect, in small compass, what the Bible as a whole is seeking to say? For the creed is not a *norma normans*, but a *norma normata*. It stands under the judgment of the scriptural testimony as a whole, even though it stands as a record of what the church has believed to be the essential message of the Scriptures. It is by applying the norm of Scripture to that hermeneutic instrument of the church which we know as the Apostles' Creed that Oscar Cullmann is led to question whether faith's confession of the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body should have been shifted from the second article, concerning the Son, to the third article, which concerns the Holy Spirit. According to the New Testament, these are objective reality in the saving work of Jesus Christ before they come to be subjectively appropriated through baptism and the Holy Spirit.

As ecumenical instrument the creed will be efficacious in performing its function in so far as it really does represent the historical continuity of the church and in so far as it is generally recognized as a symbol of unity by the several churches at the present time. One can scarcely overestimate the great service rendered to the church in this respect by the Apostles' Creed. Generally acknowledged as it is as an authentic witness to the gospel, its common use by the churches must inevitably serve the cause of unity in the church. The Apostles' Creed may indeed prove to be irreplaceable as a creedal instrument for securing and fostering a truly ecumenical unity.

As instrument in aid of mission the creed can be expected to function effectively in a diversity of ways. (a) It will serve the believing community as battle-cry in the struggle against evil under the lordship of Christ, in so far as the members of the community can wholeheartedly make the confession of faith their own. (b) As confession of faith it will serve to strengthen faith, in so far as it is truly meaningful to those who are invited by the church to make it their own. (c) It will serve as a judgment of the world and as an appeal to the world to find in Jesus Christ freedom for human life in the present and openness for the fulfilment of the human good in the future, in so far as the integrity of man's personal being is seen to be safeguarded, rather than destroyed, by the confession of the truth that promises its fulfilment.

There are some who will maintain that these conditions are not met by the Apostles' Creed. It may indeed perform adequately – that is, authori-

tatively – some of the functions for which the church needs a statement of this kind. But it fails (we are told) at the crucial point of intelligibility for modern man. Consequently, we are urged to try to write a new creed, which will seek to speak the truth in a language less misleading than the (at best) ambiguous language of the Apostles' Creed.

However, before we make this finding our own, we should take careful account of the following considerations. (a) Let us keep in mind the major difference, already mentioned, between the two kinds of creed: on the one hand, the short yet integral confession of the central core of the gospel, and on the other hand, the more detailed exposition of the Christian faith, set within the context of modern times and seeking to answer, from the standpoint of the gospel, the questions raised by the times in which we live. (b) Surely there is much to be said in favour of having one brief confession of faith which is authoritative with regard to all the functions that we have mentioned. But, if that is the case, is there any creed that can qualify for this role other than the Apostles' Creed or a creed that is its child or blood-brother? (c) To argue in this way is indeed to assume that modern difficulties with the language of the Apostles' Creed are not insuperable. But need we suppose that they are? Two ways of dealing with them are suggested in our recognized approaches to the problem of the language of Scripture – the language which the Apostles' Creed mainly uses. On the one hand, many see value in retaining somewhat archaic forms for liturgical purposes, so long as the key to their interpretation is preserved in the educational process of preaching and teaching in the church. On the other hand, many find it preferable to use modern English-language translations of the Scriptures in public worship. It might well be possible to find a universally acceptable modern translation of the Apostles' Creed

In any event, we must take with genuine seriousness the fact that the Apostles' Creed has been and continues to be regarded in most of our churches as the fundamental confession of our common Christian faith. Whatever may be our decision concerning the need for other creeds, we must ensure that this creed will not be lost from the church's liturgy and life.