

The Ancient Creeds in the Modern Church

DURING the first half of this century there have been notable improvements in the conduct of Divine Service and a steadily increasing observance of the Christian Year. It seems all the more strange that still, in the vast majority of Scottish Churches, little if any place is given to the Creed, either in religious instruction or in public worship.

This ignoring of the Creeds is certainly not due to any principle inherent in our Scottish ecclesiastical tradition or theological outlook. The early Reformers specifically recommended the use of the Apostles' Creed in public worship. In the 1567 edition of the *Compendious Booke of Godly and Spiritual Songs* (better known as the *Gude and Godlie Ballads*) is included a catechism which is described as containing the Commandments, Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer. Sage, writing in the second half of the 17th century, says: "Our reformers in their public assembly never omitted to make a solemn and public confession of their faith by rehearsing that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed." Hewat's *Form of Prayer* "which probably reflects the opinion of modern Presbyterians of about 1615, has the following rubric: 'this reading being ended, then let him recite the Creed which is the ordinary confession of faith.' This comes immediately before the last prayer and evidently was meant to follow the sermon, when the Form was used by a minister." ⁽¹⁾

At least in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries this Creed was regularly used as a basis of instruction for catechumens, and was regarded as the normal test for those claiming the privilege of the ministrations of the Church. "Parents requiring baptism for their offspring had to be able to repeat the Lord's Prayer and the Belief, and if they were unable to do so, then some other person who could was to present their child In the earlier days of the Reformed Church marriage was not allowed to anyone who was not versed in the chief points of the Christian Faith. The usual religious knowledge insisted on was ability to repeat the Lord's Prayer, the

⁽¹⁾ William McMillan, *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, 1560-1638.

Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed
Quite a number of cases occur in the old records of fines being imposed on candidates for matrimony, who could not repeat the required pieces. In one case a marriage was actually stopped until the bridegroom was sufficiently instructed to be able to repeat what was necessary." (1)

Although, since the middle of the seventeenth century, the Apostles' Creed has never been given the same place in the Church's life as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, yet it is printed at the end of the *Shorter Catechism* with the significant explanation: "Albeit the substance of the doctrine comprised in that abridgment commonly called 'The Apostles' Creed' be fully set forth in each of the Catechisms, so as there is no necessity of inserting the Creed itself; yet it is here annexed not as though it were composed by the Apostles or ought to be esteemed canonical Scripture, as the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, but because it is a brief sum of the Christian Faith agreeable to the Word of God and anciently received in the Churches of Christ." The doctrinal and traditional authority of the Creed are thus explicitly recognized. Its place in the life and worship of the Church is not in any way questioned. The claim is simply made that the two catechisms set forth the same doctrine as the Creed, but in a fuller and more comprehensive manner.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to plead for a new recognition of the value of the ancient Creeds in an age when the Catechism has been almost entirely displaced from the life of the Scottish Church, and to advocate their more regular use in the canonical Sunday services as commended in the *Book of Common Order*, 1940; a recommendation which has the official imprimatur of the General Assembly.

The first and fundamental value of the Creeds is theological. Through successive centuries of controversy, of persecution and of change, they have safeguarded the great central Christian doctrines against attack from many different quarters.

The Nicene Creed was ignored by most of the early reformers, doubtless because of its close association with the Mass, and still to-day is not in use in any of the Lutheran Churches. John Knox who, in the *Book of Common Order*, almost wholly adopted the customs of Geneva, did not recommend its use. So that it has never been known

(1) William McMillan, *op. cit.*

in Scotland as it ought. It is, nevertheless, the finest and most satisfying of the three ancient formulas. Enshrining the profoundest thinking of the Church on the central realities of the Christian Gospel at a time when Christendom had not yet been finally torn by schism, it is a consummate statement of great truths in concise and memorable form.

Admittedly the Nicene Creed is couched in language and thought-forms which sound a little strangely in the ears of those accustomed to the terminology of modern science or certain schools of contemporary philosophy. But this is a charge which could also be brought against all the documents in the New Testament. Admittedly also, all three of the ancient ecumenical Creeds were drawn up largely as answers to certain dangerous heresies which were threatening to corrupt true Christian doctrine in the early centuries. But this fact does not invalidate their use today. It does not even unduly "date" them. For the heretical tendencies which they implicitly refute and guard against have broken out again and again in different forms throughout the whole history of the Church. And those central truths which the Nicene Creed so plainly asserts, namely the reality of the Incarnation, the true divinity and true humanity of Christ, the threefold personality and revelation of God, the assurance of life everlasting, are precisely those truths which today, as in every generation, constitute the very heart and essence of the Christian Gospel.

The same theological value is to be found in the Apostles' Creed. While in all probability it did not reach the final form in which we know it until the eighth century, yet in a rudimentary form it undoubtedly goes back to at least the second century, and from that time was used as a formula for profession of faith by catechumens at their baptism. As a short, simple, and compendious statement of what a Christian believes on the doctrinal side, it would be almost impossible to improve upon. Here again are proclaimed, in plain unmistakable phrases, the great essential facts and truths of the Christian Gospel: the nature of God, the reality of sin, the redemptive mission and work of Christ, the fact of forgiveness, the world-wide fellowship of the Church, the certainty of the life after death.

As a basis for the instruction of young believers the Apostles' Creed is of inestimable value. Its compactness and brevity commend it especially to a generation that has

no patience, even if it had the desire, to master the *Shorter Catechism* or the *Westminster Confession*. One of the most critical problems facing the Church in our time is the problem of educating the young in the truths of the Christian religion. The fundamental desideratum is a personal discovery of the Bible, in all its wealth of spiritual inspiration and moral guidance. But experience has proved that some sort of summary of biblical truth is required. There is no prospect of a return to the *Shorter Catechism* or *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*. The only doctrinal document capable of taking the place of these older, longer Confessions, and fulfilling their function, is the Apostles' Creed. It is easily memorable. It is entirely Scriptural in content. It has behind it the authority of widely accepted tradition. A notable step would be taken towards arresting the decay of religious knowledge if every boy and girl were to be sent out into the world with this Belief implanted in their head and heart.

The Creeds have also a great liturgical value, and there is a very strong case for their use as a regular and distinctive act in public worship ; this chiefly on two grounds :

1. In the recitation of the Creed we explicitly proclaim ourselves as belonging to the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and declare our unity in the Faith with fellow-Christians of all the centuries and of all lands. This is especially true of the Nicene Creed which, with the exception of a single word, was commonly used throughout the whole of Christendom up to the middle of the sixteenth century. It would be a great gain were this magnificent profession of belief used regularly in the Scottish Communion Office. At first unfamiliar, it will gradually make its power felt in a congregation. And the stately, solemn phrases carry with them that sense of the "numinous," which ought always to accompany the celebration of the Sacrament. The same is true in a lesser degree of the Apostles' Creed, which is more suitable for regular repetition at ordinary Morning and Evening Service, both as being shorter and as being more readily intelligible to all sorts and conditions of men.

To join in the Creed with voice and heart with a worshipping congregation, whether it be in a stately cathedral or in a simple church in some remote highland glen, is to feel oneself united with a great company which no man can number, one in faith and hope and charity with all the vast family of God scattered across the earth.

2. The use of the Creeds in public worship is also of value as a witness to the outside world or to those who are perhaps standing hesitant on the threshold of the Church. There are few things more moving than to hear the gathered congregation of worshipping folk joining with one voice in those familiar, confident words of Christian belief. Here is the clear, explicit, whole-hearted response of the Christian community, to the invitation and promises of the Gospel. It is a part of the service in which all can unite. If the children have been taught it in Sunday School and the catechumens instructed on it in preparation for confirmation, then it will be familiar even to the youngest. In some churches it is the custom to intone it. But personal experience of both methods has convinced the writer that it is far better that the Creeds be said in plain speech. This method is more natural, more acceptable to the majority of people, and much more impressive to listen to.

If any worshipper feels intellectual difficulty over some particular phrase or clause, let him of course keep honourable silence when that clause is reached. But the recitation of the Creed in public worship is not primarily an individual act, but a corporate act. It is a declaration by the Church Universal of "the Faith once delivered to the saints" and handed on from generation to generation. In an age of scepticism and doubt, in an age when the Bible is little read and the *Shorter Catechism* almost wholly forgotten, how fine a witness to the world is such a regular public proclamation of the Christian Gospel.

The demand is sometimes made: Let us write, or rewrite a modern creed for modern man.

Even if such a thing were desirable (which is highly dubious) it would not at present be practicable. No statement of belief drawn up by any conceivable group of Christians appointed for the purpose would be likely to find general acceptance throughout Christendom. A "modern creed" would more probably divide than unite Christians of different tradition and temperament. It would, moreover, be difficult to gain for such a new formula any authority, even within a single Communion. Some twenty years ago the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland remitted to a special committee under the chairmanship of the Rev. Professor H. R. Mackintosh, to prepare a *Short Statement of the Church's Faith*. As one of the members of that committee who sat round a table at many long meetings, the writer can remember the numerous

occasions on which agreement was found extremely difficult, and some vague phrase had to be discovered to hide these differences under a cloak of compromise. When the new statement was finally framed and published, it met with but a lukewarm welcome, even from those who had demanded its preparation, and has already been almost overtaken by oblivion.

On the other hand, at the first Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne in 1927 it was found that the only statement of Christian belief which all the delegates could agree to accept was the Nicene Creed. Here was a formula of recognized authority, of long antiquity, which precedes the great divisions of Christendom and which safeguards with unmistakable intent the supernatural facts and truths of the Gospel⁽¹⁾.

It may be that some day a re-united Church, or even the World Council of Churches, moved thereto by the Spirit of Truth, may be able to formulate a new statement of belief which will again have ecumenical authority and commend itself to the whole of Christendom ; but that time is not yet.

"Why, then," it may be asked, "in view of all that has been said about the theological, the liturgical, the ecumenic value of the ancient Creeds, do they find no place in the life and worship of the great majority of parish churches in Scotland?"

The chief reason is probably to be found in the assumption that neither of the ancient ecumenical Creeds is to-day quite defensible philosophically and theologically. Modern critics argue not only that the language of the Creeds is antiquated, but that their theological presuppositions are outmoded. It is insincere, say these critics, to proclaim Christian truths in the language of pre-Copernican science or in the thought-forms of Greek philosophy. The answer to this common line of argument is forcefully supplied by Professor Arthur Ramsey. "If these two Creeds be examined as to their place in comparative religious ideas and literature, it will be at once apparent that the Faith which they proclaim is not Greek, speculative, philosophical, but historical, biblical, Semitic, eschatological, a Faith

(1) "We members of the Conference on Faith and Order, coming from all parts of the world in the interest of Christian unity . . . notwithstanding the differences in doctrine among us, are united in a common Christian Faith which is proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures and is witnessed to and safeguarded in the Ecumenical Creed, commonly called the Nicene, and in the Apostles' Creed". Received by the full Conference, *nem. con.*, August 19th, 1927.

which does not make general propositions about the nature of God, but which looks back to certain events in history wherein God has acted, and which looks forward to God's own consummation of these acts for us men and for our salvation The biblical Gospel has overcome the speculative mind. And the simple, pictorial language of 'He came down,' 'He ascended' is not the language of a time or of a school of thought, but the inescapable language of the human race and of common life. Language less mythological in form is less permanent. A creed which substituted for these pictorial phrases the 'language of modern thought' or any scheme of thought, would be the creed of an ephemeral scholasticism and not the creed of a Gospel before which all scholasticisms must bow" ⁽¹⁾.

Certain extreme liberal critics have a deeper objection to the ancient Creeds. Those who dogmatically reject the very possibility of miracle and frankly refuse to accept any event that appears "supernatural," will never be satisfied with a statement of Christian Faith which so unmistakably asserts the pre-existence of Christ, His miraculous birth, His divine human nature, His resurrection from the grave, and His eternal Kingship. But then, equally unsatisfactory to such critics are large parts of the Bible itself. Ultimately rationalism of this sort cannot recognize any kind of revelation. The very pretentiousness of its claims constitutes its fatal spiritual limitation. Christianity has no answer for those who remain unbelievers because they cannot satisfactorily measure the vast and fathomless truths of the Gospel by the little yardstick of their own intellectual apparatus.

Yet another modern prejudice against the ancient Creeds is that they lay almost exclusive stress on the Birth, Death and Resurrection of Christ as Son of God, without any reference to His teaching, His character, and His works of love, compassion and self-sacrifice. "As a result," say these critics, "the emphasis is almost entirely on the intellectual aspect of Christianity. In the Creeds is prescribed a belief, rather than a way of life, and such a presentation gives a distorted picture, a wrong balance."

Undoubtedly there is some substance in this argument. It cannot be contended that the Creeds present a complete summary of the Christian outlook or way of life. Still less are they an end in themselves. As has been well said :

(1) A. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*.

“The Creeds are not in themselves the Christian Faith. Christians do not believe in the Creeds, but with the Creeds to help them, they believe in God.” But more than that, the Creeds must always be supplemented by acceptance of the Christian ethic, by the practice of worship and prayer, by the study of the Scriptures and the use of the Sacraments. Only through the interweaving of all these various strands of Christian nurture and grace are we brought “into the unity of the Faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

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