

The Apostles' Creed.

By Jacques Roets

Every Lord's Day we recite one of the creeds together in our worship service. Have you ever wondered where these creeds come from, and why we recite them over and over? When I was a young Christian, newly converted, filled with zeal I thought this was just a formal act, a bad "tradition". It was just a ritual of a dead faith. Since growing in grace I have become ashamed at my youthful folly and have come to see the benefit and importance of this good tradition.

Much of my opposition was based upon ignorance of the history and the role of creeds in the Church of Christ. In the following three articles I want to review some of the history and the importance of each of the Three Ecumenical Creeds that we confess: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

In this article we will begin by looking at the Apostle's Creed.

It's Origin

The Apostles' Creed receives its name from a legend which ascribes authorship of the creed to the twelve apostles themselves. According to the legend the twelve apostles being together in Jerusalem, before they departed in different directions, decided to formulate a statement of their common faith. This would prevent them from each preaching something different. So being filled with the Holy Spirit, each Apostle contributed one of the articles. That is why there are twelve articles, one for each apostle. As wonderful as this story is the apostolic authorship of the creed has been shown to be a legend.

The truth is much more mundane. The current creed, that dates from the 7th or 8th century, has its roots in a much older creed that was already in use in the church in Rome around 150 A.D. This Old Roman Creed states:

I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and dead. And in the Holy Spirit; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the flesh.¹

It is easy to see how the current creed developed out of this statement of faith.

Creeds originated in the Churches because of baptism. Since many of the early believers were converts out of paganism the Church had to catechize them thoroughly in the Christian faith and they had to confess their faith before they could be baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mat. 28:19). To teach them and for them to confess their faith the Churches wrote Creeds.

It's Confession and Use

Philip Schaff, the church historian at the end of the 19th century beautifully describes the character and value of this creed as follows:

¹ O.G. Oliver, Jr. *Apostles' Creed*. In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. by Walter A. Elwell. Baker, 1984: 72.

As the Lord's Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue the Law of laws, so the Apostles' Creed is the Creed of creeds. It contains all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith necessary to salvation, in the form of fact, in simple Scripture language, and in the most natural order—the order of revelation—from God and the creation down to the resurrection and life everlasting. It is Trinitarian, and divided into three chief articles, expressing faith—in God the Father, the Maker of heaven and earth, in his only Son, our Lord and Savior, and in the Holy Spirit...the chief stress being laid on the second article, the supernatural birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.²

Schaff brings out the wonderful elements of this creed. It briefly, yet comprehensively sets forth the Christian faith. It follows the story line of God's word, which is the outline of history in general: Creation, Incarnation, Salvation, Recreation and Consummation. The creed's one central confession is the Trinity: One God in three persons. The main emphasis falls upon the work of the Son as our Savior.

The central truths of Christianity are set forth here. So in this creed we have a very basic summary of the Christian faith. That is why it is so useful in teaching new Christians the basics of the Christian faith. But this basic summary also helps to guard the Church from error and to guide them in the truth. It is impossible to confess this creed and to deny creation, or the humanity and deity of Christ, or to deny his supernatural birth and resurrection, to name but a few errors exposed by this creed.

Since the Apostles' Creed is such a basic summary of the Christian faith, it is not surprising that churches for many centuries have used it in its worship services as a basic affirmation of its faith. This tradition is of immense value for the Church. By this practice, the faith of each of God's people is strengthened every week as they, in obedience to Christ, profess their faith before the world (cf. Mat. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:8-10). The constant repetition also assures that the younger generation learns the basic teachings of the Christian faith, which God in his mercy often uses to assure the future of the Church. So the Apostles' Creed has been a wonderful instrument in Christ's hands to bind his people together in a common profession.

Philip Schaff sings the praises of this creed by showing its value and place in the Christian Church:

It is by far the best popular summary of the Christian faith ever made within so brief a space ... It is not a logical statement of abstract doctrines, but a profession of living facts and saving truths. It is a liturgical poem and an act of worship. Like the Lord's Prayer, it loses none of its charm and effect by frequent use, although by vain and thoughtless repetition, it may be made a martyr and an empty form of words. It is intelligible and edifying to a child, and fresh and rich to the profoundest Christian scholar, who, as he advances in age, delights to go back to primitive foundations and first principles. It has the fragrance of antiquity and the inestimable weight of universal consent. It is a bond of union between all ages and sections of Christendom.³

² *Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:14-15.

³ *Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. 1: *The History of Creeds*. Baker: 1998:15.