

THE NECESSITY OF CREEDS FOR COMMON AFFIRMATION—WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE NICENE CREED

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In an examination in New College last year one of the questions asked for explanation and comment upon the Nicene affirmation, "We believe . . . one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church". The majority of the answers were doubtless unexceptionable, and therefore also unmemorable, but one has stuck in my mind. It came from a student whose ambition appeared to be to obtain a B.D. degree with as little help as possible from his teachers, and the minimum disruption of his timetable by attendance at lectures. Such a programme of course makes heavy demands on one's own industry, or, that failing, one's imagination. In this particular instance it was imagination that won. The answer instructed the wondering examiners that the question misquoted the Nicene Creed. In the original Greek, the expression was, we were told, *singular*, "I believe . . .", not *plural*, "We believe . . .". "We believe . . ." was a Western modification, a Latin distortion, witnessing to the imperialistic drive of the Western Church towards a collectivism in which the individuality of genuine faith was suppressed and denied. It was, further, no accident that this remarkable and revealing change should be associated specifically with the article dealing with the Church for it was the self-understanding of the Church in the West that here displayed itself. The shift from "I" to "We" was symptomatic of the consciousness of the *Una Sancta*.

I mention this because the answer does, in a curiously inverted, back-to-front fashion, hint at something of fundamental importance. It is no accident that the original Greek of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed did in fact use the plural. In doing so it reflected a twofold conviction. First, the faith is a common one; it is shared and public, and no merely individual matter, *our* faith, not simply *my* faith. Second, it is not merely the common faith of ourselves and others in any present moment, but the same faith handed down to us from those who went before, what Athanasius could describe as "the very tradition, teaching and faith of the

Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. Upon this the Church is founded, and he who should fall away from it would not be a Christian, and should no longer so be called.” (*Ad Serap.* I. 28) From the beginning, from the earliest formulations of the *regula fidei* which underlay the later more formalised creeds of the fourth century and later, the purpose was that of common affirmation of the faith delivered. Already in the second century Irenaeus gave splendid expression to these convictions:

The Church although scattered through the whole world even to the ends of the earth has received the faith from the Apostles and from their disciples. This is the faith in one God the Father almighty, who has made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit who through the prophets proclaimed God’s ways with man, and the advents [of Christ], the birth from a virgin, and the suffering and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his coming from heaven in the glory of the Father to consummate all things, and to raise up all flesh of all mankind. . . . Since the Church has received this preaching and this faith . . . although she is scattered through the whole world, she preserves it carefully, as one household: and the whole Church alike believes in these things, as having one soul and heart, and in unison preaching these beliefs, and teaches and hands them on as having one mouth. For though there are many different languages in the world, still the meaning of the tradition is one and the same . . . just as the sun, God’s creature, is one and the same in all the world, so the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all men who wish to come to the knowledge of the truth. (*Adv. Haer.* I.x.1-2)

We can perhaps illustrate this by comparing the Creed to a medieval cathedral. The faith it expresses is a faith into which we enter, which surrounds and informs our personal belief. It expresses in words what the cathedral expresses in soaring mass of masonry, in space leaping upwards, borne aloft by the weight of light and coloured and patterned by stained glass depicting the biblical narrative. The cathedral is at once a visible word and a home for worship, contemplation, and devotion. The Creed is a frame of words supplying a similar home and inward space and light informing the understanding and enabling the articulation of

faith. It is, so to speak, already there, prepared for us if we will cross the threshold. The same sense is there in the baptismal ceremony described by Hippolytus, where in effect the *regula fidei* was stated in the form of three questions, to each of which the person about to be baptised had to answer, "I believe" (*Apostolic Tradition* xxi-xxii), and also in the practice in some sections of the early Church of instructing in the precise terms of the Creed only *after* baptism—the *redditio symboli* which signalled that the former catechumen was now in the full sense a member of the household of faith.

We have not yet come to the specific reasons for the framing of the Nicene Creed in 381, but only pointed to the broader purpose and function of the quite considerable variety of credal statements in the earliest centuries. They served to sum up what were perceived as the main themes of the Gospel, to focus them for teaching and preaching, and also to provide a form in which fitting response to the proclamation might be expressed. They were very closely linked with worship and instruction, and no hard and fast line can be drawn between the early forms of the *regula fidei* and such other focal summaries as, for example, the eucharistic prayer. Nor, in the second and third centuries, was there any thought that there should be a single, standard credal formula for universal acceptance. The common faith could be affirmed and recognised in various forms provided the essential elements were included in some appropriate fashion. There were, however, pressures which naturally encouraged moves towards standardisation. A natural process of assimilation between different expressions of the *regula fidei* can be traced, while the need to counteract specific teachings diagnosed as heretical played its own part in standardising both emphases and formulations. The emphasis on God as Creator and on the incarnation and suffering of Jesus Christ, for example, was intensified in the face of gnostic rejection. So the formulations of the as yet only loosely defined *regula fidei* in the second and third centuries reflect something of the same move towards uniformity which can also be traced in the spread of the pattern of monarchical episcopacy and the rather slower process of settling the New Testament canon.

With the fourth century a new set of factors came into play which were to give a new kind of creed a quite new significance. The Arian controversy threatened for half a century to split the Church apart, but on the other hand the conversion of Constantine and the subsequent establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Empire brought a fresh urgency to the desire for uniformity, and a new instrument for achieving it in the

ecumenical council. The first of these councils formulated the original Nicene Creed in order thereby to give the clearest and sharpest expression to the rejection of Arius' teaching. This Creed is no longer simply an informal or merely locally applied pattern of central teachings; it is a test of theological orthodoxy, built around the term—to many both obscure and obnoxious—*homoousios*. While half a hundred years of conflict followed, the end result at the Council of Constantinople in 381 was the framing of the fuller Nicene Creed as we now know it—not simply an expansion of the original, but a different and longer one. Here now is a Creed which becomes a “necessity for common affirmation” in a quite different sense from anything in the past. So the Council of Ephesus in 431 went so far as to determine “that none may present or even write or compile another creed than that determined by the holy fathers congregated at Nicea with the Holy Spirit. . . .” (DS 265)

That is not, however, quite the whole story. While the Eastern Orthodox Churches have broadly held to the position stated at Ephesus, and to the wording of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the West has departed from it in two main respects. One is the insertion of the *filioque* clause in the reference to the procession of the Holy Spirit. Another is that in the West the Nicene Creed, though recognised and used, tended through the Dark and early Middle Ages to be much less prominent than the so-called Apostles' Creed, which is the fullest expansion of the old Roman formula known from about the beginning of the third century, but which in its final form dates from eighth century Gaul. A good deal of importance was also given to the misnamed Athanasian Creed, like the Apostles' a purely Western, Latin production, dating from about the end of the fifth century. The Nicene Creed has therefore not entirely succeeded down through history in playing to the full the role initially ascribed to it. Its “necessity for common affirmation” has been honoured as much in the breach as in the observance. To say this is not of course to deny its status; it is to observe that that status may not always have been recognised in the sense of the early councils, and this in turn must raise further questions of the kind to which we shall come shortly.

In beginning with these observations on the remoter reaches of early Church history, I do not mean to turn a subject of contemporary concern and relevance into an occasion for an exercise in unapplied archaeology. The question that we must address is whether or in what way creeds, or any particular creed, might be necessary for the common affirmation of Christian faith.

Yet such questions can be usefully informed by taking account of the kinds of answer that history might offer, and of the complexities and differentiations that it encourages us to take into account. Nor is it only ancient or medieval history that is relevant here. We should at least notice that the movement of Protestantism since the Reformation has raised its own serious questions. The leading Reformers in the main line had high regard for the ancient creeds (though more, perhaps, for the Apostles' than for the Nicene), but this was not always shared by their successors. Indeed through the seventeenth century there was a clear revolt against the continued adherence to and use of the early creeds, while the eighteenth century saw an intensification of "non-credal" or "non-confessional" Christianity which issued in a widespread departing also from the various confessional statements of the Reformation age itself. The nineteenth century saw something of a reversal in at least some quarters, and the modern ecumenical movement has helped in a fresh way to highlight the significance of the Nicene Creed as the one Creed of old and undivided Christendom. Most of us here have probably been to some degree influenced by these movements, but even so we have to recognise that the very mixed nature of the development into the modern era has bequeathed a wide diversity of viewpoints within, for example, the Church of Scotland. It contains the high Catholic Reformed theology so well represented by Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick's *Manual of Church Doctrine*; but also, alongside it, other and very different outlooks. It would not be difficult, for example, to discern latter-day forms of Westminster Puritanism, of (frequently non-confessional) Evangelicalism, and indeed of that Moderatism whose attention was largely taken up with keeping the institution going as a generally Good Thing, but which abhorred excessive theological enthusiasm from any quarter. This internal diversity raises for the Church problems in ecumenical spheres similar to, though by no means as extreme as, those faced by the Anglican communion. The primary difficulty encountered in any attempt to reach rapprochement between Anglicanism and any other tradition is the internal range of convictions and attitudes within Anglicanism itself, spreading as it does from exceeding high Anglo-catholicism to exceeding low Fundamentalism. While the situation in the Church of Scotland may not be quite so bad, it is difficult enough; and I for one have the uneasy impression that our ecumenical wing is at present in grave danger of becoming an isolated party within a largely sectarian-minded community, or at best one whose normal vision is both ecumenically and historically somewhat parochial. This has a direct bearing upon the question of creeds and common *ecumenical* affirmation: To some it seems self-evident that the

Nicene Creed must here play a decisive role, but to others the Nicene Creed itself appears totally alien, unfamiliar, and irrelevant. The question of common affirmation thus arises *within* a body such as the Church of Scotland as well as *between* separated churches.

These initial reflections can suggest some aspects of our subject that need to be considered. *First*, what do we mean by “creeds” when we talk of “creeds for common affirmation”? *Second*, in what sense might creeds be *necessary* for such common affirmation? *Third*, what is the nature of “common affirmation”, and what can it enable, achieve, or hope for? My aim here, it should be said, is more to open up these questions than to offer any final answers to them.

What is a Creed?

If one begins on the assumption that a creed is a statement such as the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed, or even that these are the only creeds in existence, then this question could be easily answered—might indeed appear rather trivial. Enough has however already been said to indicate that such a view would be something of a simplification of the real situation. There were many other creeds in the early church, and a whole host of other credal or confessional statements have been drawn up in subsequent ages. And these have been and can still be used in many different ways, each in turn reflecting back on the understanding of what a creed is meant to be. If a creed is defined as an authoritative, comprehensive definition of the central points of the faith to which all who would be known as Christians are expected to subscribe, then only the Nicene Creed can claim ever to have enjoyed such standing, even theoretically. If it is more loosely understood as a widely accepted, and *potentially* universally acceptable formula giving positive expression to such main points, then the Apostles’ Creed would be an obvious example. But the history of credal forms runs so far back that we must consider seriously the possibility that the narrower, post-third century conception of “*the creed*” may be rather too narrow, and needs to be further widened. Then one might describe as credal those formulations—none of them necessarily universally accepted or treated as canonically binding—which have served and may still serve to give authentic (if partial) expression to the faith of the Church. Such a more open definition would certainly harmonise with the position that appears to have obtained in the New Testament, where a variety of what may be called proto-credal forms can be traced, as well as in the Church of the following two

centuries—to say nothing of the *de facto* position in many Protestant churches since the Reformation.

The view I am here considering could be taken to various lengths. The main dividing-line would, I think, be between two approaches: One, which with a generally relativising understanding of creeds and credal formulae, treated the creeds of the fourth and later centuries as essentially on the same level as, say, Irenaeus' *regula fidei*, or particular New Testament formulations; and one which felt it necessary nevertheless to retain and observe the distinctive fresh elements which entered in with the councils of Nicea and Constantinople, in particular the idea of *one universal* creed for all Christians which could itself serve as the touchstone by which all other expressions of the faith could be tested. On this second account, recognition of the credal character of earlier formulae might serve to remind us that the Nicene Creed also has its limitations without denying or disputing its greater completeness or more specially normative character. No doubt further possible positions could be distinguished but this broad division may serve our present purpose.

We may therefore distinguish very generally three possible positions. One would focus on, say, the Nicene Creed as *the* credal formula that matters separating it off from all others as qualitatively different and uniquely authoritative. Another would question whether it has any distinctly or specially normative character, and recognise it simply as one among many formulations which have served to some degree to articulate Christian faith. Between these two extremes—which might, very roughly, be ascribed to Eastern Orthodoxy and wide tracts of modern Protestantism respectively—lies a third option, giving a special place to the Nicene Creed, but making room for other credal forms as well. This has been, by and large, the more Catholic approach of several Western churches, including the Church of Scotland or at any rate of some strands in it. With these three broad alternatives in mind, let us turn to the question of the *necessity* of creeds.

The Necessity of Creeds

Corresponding to the three positions just sketched we may also distinguish three broad conceptions of the “necessity” for a creed or creeds. On the first view, the necessity is for a single, unifying and binding formula, dividing between heresy and orthodoxy, marking out the limits of the essential faith, and so serving as a canonical test of doctrinal truth in a uniquely authoritative and normative fashion. This would emphasise especially the elements

that entered in with the Arian controversy and the first ecumenical councils, and take its bearings essentially from the fourth and fifth centuries. There in this formula is the classical standard of the faith, defined and delimited and specified in a quite clear-cut way.

The attractiveness of this outlook is obvious. It offers the security of settled answers, of clarity and definition, and rules out any ambiguity as to the nature and scope of the faith. There it is in the Creed, and that is that. Yet similar questions must arise here as with any kind of positivistic fundamentalism. The appearance of absolute clarity and total comprehensiveness is only an appearance, which, by diverting attention from the need to apprehend and judge of the truth being witnessed to, and the risks and openness that that need necessarily involves, risks at the same time the obscuring of the real meaning of the Creed and its vital relevance and bearing for ourselves. The authority of the Creed like that of the Bible when turned into a *dogma*, cuts across the practical *functional* authority it has in fact, its lively role in the ongoing movement of worship and service, faith and life, witness and proclamation. It threatens to fossilise and absolutise what by its nature is only penultimate. The necessity of the Creed, if understood in this sense, risks becoming a kind of credal absolutism.

The other two views would work with a more flexible conception of “necessity”. The need according to them would be for some—perhaps for a whole range of—formulae, various combinations of which could be taken together as marking out and highlighting the essential themes and emphases of Christian faith. The necessity would not be for a single definition in the narrower sense of the first approach, but for what is implicit in the nature of the Gospel message itself—some positive identification of what is to be said and what not to be said in the light of Jesus Christ and in response to the working of the Spirit. In other words, the necessity arises from the fact that the Gospel is *statable* and therefore requires verbal expression in public and repeatable form. On this account, no single credal formula could be expected to carry the whole weight or to say once and for all everything that needs to be said, or to define once and for all how it is to be said. It might indeed be felt that to put too much weight on any single form would inevitably be to risk distortion by burdening it with greater weight than it can carry without distortion and the risk of fatigue fracture. The centre of gravity would not accordingly lie in any creed as such, but in the need to discern and apply this or that expression of the Gospel message with judgment and perception, tracing through the words the realities to which they direct us.

In support of this kind of view it can be observed that it is much truer in fact to the way in which theology and proclamation actually operate and have operated down through the centuries. But a further question arises as to how far all is to be swallowed up in a kind of all-embracing relativity; and here the distinction between the second and third views comes into focus. The second option, which tends to relativise all, would incline to give no special place to the fourth century achievement or to the Nicene Creed; it would be merely one among many forms of expression of Christian conviction. On this showing, while there is a general broad necessity for *some* network or patchwork of central affirmations which can be recognised and combined to outline the faith, the question of how these are discriminated between and balanced against each other would remain extremely open, and open to constant revision in the light of fresh concerns and new insights, themselves of course also time- and history-conditioned, relative and transient.

What distinguishes the third option from the second is that it would give rather greater weight to the development within the early Church and to the conclusions of the early councils. Without absolutising the Nicene Creed, it would nevertheless wish to retain what it achieved and hold to the answers it gave, and in that sense also wish to test other old or new affirmations against its implications. The necessity of credal formulae in general would also open up into the more particular need for certain central and decisive witnesses to be given particular weight, both as being more comprehensive than others, and as driving more deeply at this or that fundamental point. In this sense the Nicene Creed would have special place because of the significance of what it affirms and of what it denies as having abiding relevance as a point of reference and orientation and guidance for continuing theological reflection and enquiry. In this case, it would have a specially necessary place and demand special attention, not merely as a *venerable* but as a *classical* account which cannot simply be set aside or placed on the same level as any others one might choose to set alongside it. Clearly, to make such a judgment also implies the making of related judgments about the import of the patristic development, judgments which we cannot here explore, but which would include, for instance, the conviction not only that Nicea and Constantinople were right to reject Arianism, but also that that particular decision is of abiding relevance for the deepest truth of the Gospel, and therefore in that sense not merely an historical curiosity, but a perennial gain which cannot be set on one side but must continually be reappropriated.

Creeds and Common Affirmation

What one regards as “a creed” and the nature of the “necessity” it is assumed to possess bear also upon the usefulness and function of any such creed for “common affirmation”. On the first view, there is one creed, the Nicene, and common affirmation is common affirmation of the Nicene Creed. On the second, there are many credal forms, and common affirmation would, rather be a matter of recognising the community of faith in and through a diversity of forms of expression. On the third the variety of credal forms would nevertheless also include and give special place to the Nicene Creed as having central significance within the fabric of belief, though not as standing simply by itself. And the very nature of what is understood to *be* “common affirmation” would be rather differently conceived in each of these cases, as would the nature of the “community” it involves and enables. The first model would be of a community defined by adherence to a single statement; the second of a community defined much more vaguely; the third of a community defined more flexibly than in the first, but giving special place nonetheless to the classical achievement of the patristic era as *a* central and essential element in the whole pattern of the common faith and affirmation.

On the first model, “common affirmation” seems to reduce to “common subscription to a single statement”. On the second it remains unclear whether “common affirmation” need involve any coincidence in forms of expression at all, or anything more than some—perhaps very loose—family resemblance in aim, intention and conviction. On the third, room would be made both for certain shared forms and for the possibility of a certain diversity, presumably in some fashion capable of being “reconciled diversity” as the current phrase has it. To this extent, the third understanding of “common affirmation” would include elements from both the first and second, but avoid the narrowness of the one and the total vagueness of the other. This would suggest that it is in fact the most adequate of the three in itself, and the most likely to be ecumenically fruitful at the present time.

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These remarks have inevitably been rather abstract, general and schematic. But they may help to bring into the open some of the ambiguities lurking under my title. It is of course true that common affirmation requires some common form; and if one defines a creed as such a common form, then the necessity of creeds for common affirmation is a simple tautology. But there can be many a slip between such simple definitional solutions and

their practical applications. I hope these reflections, while falling far short of drawing out such applications, may perhaps help to sketch out the paths toward them.

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