

# THE CHRISTIAN'S CREED

Desmond Ford

One of the earliest creeds, known as The Apostles' Creed, dates back at least to the close of the fourth century after Christ. Though linked with the twelve, it certainly was not their formation. In later years came the Athanasian and the Nicene Creeds and after more than ten centuries the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Many other confessions are known to church history. In view of the necessity of setting forth what we believe to be the essence of revealed truth, what should be our attitude to such creedal statements?

We should neither deify nor despise such. Neither should we exaggerate the differences between creedal affirmations made by various churches. Probably in at least eighty percent of Christian issues most groups are agreed. While church councils could endorse celibacy of the clergy, the infallibility of the pope, the inspiration of Hebrew vowel points in Scripture, and the expulsion of many faithful from the communion of the saints, yet the marvel is not that Christ's disciples have so often strayed from his truth, but that they have not strayed further. Can we avoid straying with them? If we have already strayed, how do we retrace our steps?

## A Warning

Let us beware of the corruption of our own natures. Pray this prayer: "From the bigotry that is afraid of new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truth, and from the arrogance that thinks it has all truth — dear Lord, deliver us." Carefully, prayerfully, studiously, lovingly, let us seek for the truth of God. And as we seek, let us cherish the promise of Christ that those who seek in order to do will know all they need to know (Jn 7:17).

Too many in rank self-confidence despise the past and its treasures. It is tempting to think that we, our little group, are **the** people, and that wisdom will perish with us. This attitude to the present is the opposite error to idolizing the past. Let us keep in mind the wise words of Bernard Ramm:

If Christ has founded a Church and given it His word; if the Holy Spirit is the Teacher of the faithful; if the Church is "the house of God. . . the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15); then every generation of Christian theologians must be prepared to take seriously the history of theology (broadly interpreted to include symbols, councils, theologians, treatises) as possessing manifestations of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is in the theology that the church seeks to express the truths of revelation, and therefore it is not Church history in general which possesses an authority for the Christian interpreter, but the history of theology. (Bernard Ramm, **The Pattern of Religious Authority**, p. 57.)

## Preeminence to the Words of Jesus

The other half of the truth has been given us by men such as Dr. John Watson. He warned against all those who forgot the primacy of the words of Jesus in

establishing doctrine. Did not our Lord say that we all have but one Master, even Christ? Did he not deny having withheld anything essential for them? Did he not declare on that last night that all later discoveries of truth would be but the unfoldings of what he had already taught? One thing is certain — none of the apostles ever exalted themselves above Christ in the matter of bestowing truth. Paul and John and all the rest continually resorted to the remembered words of their Lord to solve issues of belief (see 1 Cor 7:10; 1 Jn 2:7; Heb 2:3; Jude 3 RSV).

## Says Watson:

The religion of Protestants, or let us say Christians, is not the Bible in all its parts, but first of all that portion which is its soul, by which the teaching of Prophets and Apostles must itself be judged — the very words of Jesus.

When Jesus founded that unique society which He called the Kingdom of God, and we prefer to call the Church, it was necessary He should lay down its basis, and this is what He did in the Sermon on the Mount. . . . It was an elaborate and deliberate utterance, made by arrangement, and to a select audience. It was Christ's manifesto, and the constitution of Christianity. . . . Among all the creeds of Christendom the only one which has the authority of Christ Himself is the Sermon on the Mount. When one reads the Creed which was given by Jesus, and the creeds which have been made by Christians, he cannot fail to detect an immense difference. . . . We all must know many persons who would pass as good Christians by the Sermon, and be cast out by the Creeds, and many to whom the Creeds are a broad way and the Sermon is a very strait gate.

What must strike every person about Jesus' sermon is that it is not metaphysical but ethical. What He lays stress upon are such points as these: the Fatherhood of God over the human family; His perpetual and beneficent providence for all His children; the excellence of simple truth in God over the earthly care of this world; the obligation of God's children to be like their Father in heaven; the paramount importance of true and holy motives; the worthlessness of a merely formal righteousness; the inestimable value of heart righteousness; forgiveness of sins dependent on our forgiving our neighbor; the fulfilling of the law, and the play of the tender and passive virtues. Upon the man who desired to be His disciple and a member of God's Kingdom were laid the conditions of a pure heart, of a forgiving spirit, of a helpful hand, of a heavenly purpose, of an unworldly mind. Christ did not ground His Christianity in thinking, or in doing, but, first of all, in being. (John Watson, **The Mind of the Master**, pp.14-17.)

The common sense of Watson's warning is apparent. While no two men are fully agreed on doctrinal truth almost all men are agreed on the chief elements of good character. If you were to leave your loved ones with someone in time of crisis, would you choose on the basis of whether that person was a Trinitarian or whether he or she were kind and reliable?

James reminds us that "the devils believe and tremble." Perhaps this is what Milton had in mind in "Paradise Lost" when he placed a party of the lost on a hill in hell discussing the doctrine of predestination.

## Doctrine Alone Can Kill!

In **Six Trials**, edited by R.S. Brumbaugh, we find graphic examples of the cruelty and prejudice of human dogma and its adherents. The famous trials of



Dreyfus, Sacco, and Vanzetti yield convincing evidence of our natural bigotry and blindness to evidence. As one considers the following quotations regarding secular trials let the memory also recall the history of theological trials such as those of Huss at Constance and Luther at Worms.

... violence. . . animated the participants and . . . [the] obstinacy of the governing classes and . . . the masses in refusing to consider that a monstrous injustice had been committed.

---

**Pray this prayer: "From the bigotry that is afraid of new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truth, and from the arrogance that thinks it has all truth — dear Lord, deliver us."**

---

The Dreyfus trials displayed to the full. . . the perils of blind obedience to the hierarchy.

. . . how difficult it can be for a person, a community, or a nation, once committed for reasons of pride, prestige, or power to a given course of action, to modify or reverse that course in the face of mounting evidence that it is unwise or wrong. Finally, this trial . . . demonstrates a truth that man has been a long time learning: that one can poison, burn, hang or electrocute men whose ideas are offensive and dangerous without destroying the ideas themselves, which, if they have truth in them, will live on while society finds that it has made a new set of martyrs.

One's faith in anything is terribly shaken by anybody who is ready to go to the gallows condemning and denouncing it. . . . John Brown's last written message was: I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood. (R.S. Brumbaugh (ed.), *Six Trials*, pp. 62, 82, 104.)

The same volume comments on the ecclesiastical trial of Galileo with words that should be etched into the memory of every church leader:

The lesson to be learned from this tragic, sobering history is significant. Just as vivid today as it has ever been is the fact that doctrine — when it becomes institutionalized and vested in an organization; when it becomes stiffened against all possible attack because of administrators' lack of sufficient intellectual ability or vivacity, or the energy to fight off critical opposition; when its truth alone is not the only criterion for its evaluation — then such doctrine is no longer knowledge — it is dogma. When this happens, dialogue ceases. Free enquiry ceases. Communication collapses. Gossip and plotting, cloak-room intrigues — these take over. Small men make themselves seem tall, strong with fighting stances and chest thumping. But history will record them ultimately as having assumed such postures in the cause of unreason. (Ibid., p. 49.)

All of us are capable of the errors warned against in these quotations. None of us are immune, for all of us are sinners. But how tragic if we are determined to be fools as well as sinners. Will we never learn?

### **Commitment to Christ**

No church can be a passionate witnessing church on the basis of a mere creed. Lugalama was the first martyr of Uganda. He and his fellows were seized and cast upon a framework over a fire after their limbs had been amputated by machetes. Till their tongues crisped they sang hymns to Christ. But this was no new phenomenon. Many centuries before men were lit as torches for Nero's garden, and women were flung to the ferocious beasts of the amphitheaters. For what? For a creed? No! For a denomination? No! Most of them could not have passed a Sunday-school examination in doctrine. But Christ they loved more than life.

Most of us believe in immortality because it seems impossible to us that God could develop by trial and temptation characters that reflect his own and then toss them aside. The annihilation of that which is spiritual is unthinkable. All of us at heart have the conviction that it is folly to even think it does not matter whether a man has lived like the Apostle Paul or the Emperor Nero. We believe in the harvest. But the harvest of immortality is not just to be bestowed on those with a good memory who can commit to memory thirty-nine articles or even a lesser number. We know there will be a different place for John the beloved of Jesus and Judas his betrayer, and it will not be so because of different creeds.

We quote again from Watson:

Antinomianism is the only heresy, and it is desirable to remind one's self, in a day of flabby sentiment, that Jesus was not an antinomian. Had Jesus condoned sin, then He had been the destroyer of our race, and not its savior, for the comforting of our heart had been a poor recompense for the debauchery of our conscience.

It is Jesus who has compared sin unto Gehenna, 'where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched'; who places the rich man of soft and luxurious life in torment, so that he begs for a drop of water to cool his tongue; who casts the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, where is weeping and gnashing of teeth; who declares that the fruitless branches of the vine will be gathered and burned; who sends the servants of self into the fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.

Jesus never made judgment depend either on the will of God or the belief of man. He rested judgment on the firm foundation of what each man is in the sight of the Eternal. . . . The wheat is gathered into the garner. What else could one do with wheat? The tares are burned in the fire. What else could one do with tares? When the net comes to the shore, the good fish are gathered into vessels; no one would throw them away. The bad are cast aside; no one would leave them to contaminate the good. The supercilious guests who did not value the great supper were left severely alone. If men do not care for Heaven, they will not be forced into it. The outcasts, who had never dared to dream of such a supper, were compelled to come. If men hunger for the best, the best shall be theirs.

Nothing is arbitrary; everything is reasonable. It [the judgment] is registration rather than examination; it is fulfillment rather than judgment. (Watson, pp. 205, 207-208, 209.)

All of which recommends itself to sturdy common sense. Please remember this as you read any statement of faith. Such proclamations are not affirming that salvation is determined by theological acumen and assent, or that wheat should be separated from tares on the basis of cerebral convictions about theological minutia. Jesus did not say, "Unless a man assents to and comprehends the thirty-nine articles he cannot see the kingdom of heaven." Rather, it is, "Unless a man is born again . . ." (Jn 3:3,7).

Doctrinal statements have an important place. They distill the theological essence of Scripture. They protest against distortions of truth which could either affect our conduct or warp our concept of God and his plan for men. But they are the shell rather than the nut, the rind rather than the sweet flesh, the jewel-box rather than the jewel. The nearer such doctrinal statements come to the actual content and wording of Scripture the better. But because they are an endeavor to encapsulate the infinite, they are ever open to revision, and the wise reader considers them as diagrams and graphs rather than the substance.

The shortest of all Christian creeds is that found in Scripture itself and reads: "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). We commend this inspired creed to all who seek the essence of Christianity in the words of men. □