

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 *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

sometimes, or always, baptize by immersion, it would still remain true that these passages do not teach it, and cannot be so translated into any language as to teach it without introducing into the translation an idea not in the original, and that the faithfulness of our English version in these passages is fully vindicated.

ARTICLE VIII.

CHURCH CREEDS.

BY REV. ENOCH POND, D.D., PROFESSOR IN BANGOR THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

IN all ages, Christian churches must have had creeds. As every Christian who believes anything has a creed, so every society of Christians which holds any articles of belief in common must have a common creed. Where there is no creed, a profession of *faith* cannot, in the nature of things, be made. Faith in what, if nothing is believed? And if anything is believed, then, of course, there is a creed.

A creed is as necessary to a church as the truths of the gospel are to the individual believer. As Christian piety cannot exist but in connection with some Christian truth, no more can a church exist without a professed reception of the gospel. The truths of the gospel are the basis on which it stands, the substance which it holds, the means, the aliment by which it is nourished and sustained. Without some truth to feed and rest upon, the church would vanish into nothing.

The churches of the apostles undoubtedly had a creed. It may have been, a short one at first; it may not have been reduced to writing. But there was a creed, else those who joined these churches could have made no profession of faith at all. Martha professed her faith, and recited her creed, when she said: "I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" (John xi. 27). And the eunuch did the same, when he said: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts viii. 37). These

creeds may have been as full and as satisfactory at the time and in the circumstances when they were uttered as was the Athanasian creed three hundred years afterwards. Paul speaks to the Romans of "*the form of doctrine* which he had delivered unto them," and exhorts Timothy to "*hold fast the form of sound words* which he had received"; referring, in both cases, to a virtual creed.

I have said that the creed of the apostolic churches may not have been formally written at the time; but this is a point of small importance. Nothing was written at the first; the New Testament was not all written until the last apostle was just about to leave the world. But the creed of the church *was written* at a very early period. The Apostles' Creed, so-called, is a very ancient document, though not written by any of the apostles. This was soon followed by other creeds, as occasion called for them. There was the creed of Irenæus, of Origen, of Tertullian, of Lucian the martyr, and of the churches of Jerusalem, of Alexandria, and of Antioch.¹ These were followed by the creeds of the General Councils, which were of high authority at the time, and in some places are so still.

There have been various objections to church creeds, chiefly by those who, secretly or openly, have departed from them, and are afraid of them. It has been said that they are made to take the place of scripture, and become, what the Bible should be — the standard of faith. But this is not true. A written creed must never be substituted for the scriptures. Indeed, we doubt whether it ever has been. It is rather regarded as a concise expression of what is deemed to be the sense of scripture. It is not itself the standard of faith, but a transcript, an epitome, of that infallible standard which God has given us in his word.

It is said, again, that church creeds are an infringement upon Christian liberty. Individuals must assent to them, or they cannot be admitted to the church. Christian liberty would be encroached upon, if a church should undertake to *impose* its creed upon others. But this is never done; at

¹ See Bingham's *Orig. Ecc.* Book iii. chap. 2.

least, it never should be. The church does not *impose* its creed, but merely *proposes* it for consideration, leaving those to whom it is submitted at full liberty, either to accept it and walk with that particular church, or to reject it and walk somewhere else. And is not this liberty enough? To attempt or desire a greater liberty would be to encroach on the liberty of others.

It is still further objected to creeds, that they are brought forward and professedly adopted where they cannot be understood. Persons in humble life, and even children, are made to stand up and express their assent to the more profound and mysterious doctrines of the gospel. And may not the same objection be urged against adopting the Bible as our creed? Who will pretend to understand all the profundities of scripture? Yet those who urge this objection against creeds are commonly willing to accept the Bible, and insist that this is creed enough.

The creeds of our churches, instead of making the truths of scripture more mysterious and incomprehensible, are designed to connect and simplify them, and make them more plain; so that where the Bible is understood the creed can be with greater ease.

A creed properly constructed should do little more than state the plain facts of scripture, avoiding all connected inquiries and difficulties. And, as simple facts, these statements in general *can be understood*. The child of ordinary capacity can understand it, as a fact, that there is but one God; while neither the greatest philosopher nor the profoundest theologian can grasp all that is included under this grand idea. The child may understand that somehow we are sinners in consequence of our first parents' transgression; but it has puzzled some of the wisest heads to make plain the precise nature of this connection. And so of many other doctrines. Let our creeds set forth the truths of scripture as facts, to be received as facts, without discussion or much explanation, and there will be little ground of complaint as to their abstruseness or mystery.

Experience has shown that a written creed is of essential importance to a church of Christ. It is important as a *testimony* to the great truths and facts of the gospel. It is in this way, more especially, that the church, as a body, bears its testimony. Whenever its creed is read publicly, or by whomsoever read, the church virtually says: "This is the gospel, as we understand it. These are the truths on which we rest our faith and hopes." A "Confession of Faith" is, from the very terms employed, an open testimony for Christ and his gospel. When our fathers adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith, instead of drawing one up for themselves, they did so, to use their own words, that they "might *with one mouth*, as well as heart, glorify God and our Lord Jesus Christ." They wished, with their brethren in England, to bear a *united testimony* for God and his truth.

A church creed is also important, as it tends to promote *unity, affection, confidence*. Those who are to unite habitually in the services and ordinances of religion should be agreed as to the essential points of doctrine. As they have but one Lord, and one baptism, they should be of *one faith*. They should, so far as possible, "be of the same mind and the same judgment." They must *know* and *feel* that this is the case, in order to have fellowship and confidence as Christians. But how are they to be satisfied of this, unless they have a creed, a confession of faith, to which all have given their assent? For one to profess to believe the Bible amounts to nothing in such a case. Persons of every shade of belief will profess to believe the Bible. We want to know how our brethren understand the Bible, and what opinions they draw from it; else we do not get at their real creed, and cannot know whether they agree with us in receiving the gospel.

A written creed is also of great importance as a means of preserving the purity of the church. The apostle Paul speaks of some "who had made shipwreck of the faith," and says: "He that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject." But how are such persons to be known, and how detected and convicted, unless the church have an

established creed? Without the Nicene creed, Arius could not have been excluded from the church. He was prepared to assent to almost anything. It was with great difficulty that a word was selected (*ὁμοούσιος*) which the wily heretic could not swallow. But for the creeds of the Congregational churches of Massachusetts, they could never have cleared themselves from the taint of Unitarianism. The Unitarians did what conscious heretics have always done — they made war upon creeds long before their peculiar doctrines were disclosed; hoping that if the creeds were taken out of the way they might be safe. But the creeds were retained, and in some instances strengthened, and those who could not walk with the Orthodox churches were obliged to submit to a separation.

The necessity of creeds is so very obvious that Protestant churches universally, as well as Catholics, have been led to adopt them. The Augsburg Confession, prepared by the joint labors of Luther and Melancthon, was drawn up the same year (1529) in which the memorable protest was entered which gave to the Reformers the name of Protestant. This was followed by the confessions of the Swiss churches, of the Protestants of France, of the German Reformed, of the English, Scotch, and Dutch Reformed churches — indeed, of all the early Protestants, not excepting the Socinians of Raçon.

Soon after the settlement of New England, our fathers accepted the doctrinal part of the Westminster Confession, and afterwards what was called the New England Confession. These confessions, which are substantially the same, were not only received by the churches, but sanctioned by the General Court. The effect of this action, which gave to the churches an established creed, was to do away, for a time, with separate creeds for particular churches. They had a *common creed*, on the basis of which they all professed to stand; and why should separate creeds be adopted? It is for this reason that we fail to find among most of the early churches of New England such confessions of faith as are now in use. The church covenants recognized most of the essential doctrines, and a public creed had been sanctioned

which embraced them all. But, as the authority of the old confessions gradually declined, and more especially when the churches began to be threatened with Unitarianism, they quickly resorted to the more consistent practice of a creed for each individual church—a practice which it is hoped may never be laid aside.

In more recent times, the necessity of creeds has been asserted by Unitarians themselves,—at least, by the better part of them. Their denomination became infested with a class of radicals whom no one bearing the Christian name could consent to tolerate; and in order to be rid of them, they were as earnest in favor of creeds as they had formerly been in denouncing them.

But, granting that our churches should have creeds, how shall their creeds be formed? How much shall they embrace?

Some tell us that a church creed should embrace no doctrine which a truly pious person can, by any possibility, reject; since, if it do, we may be under the necessity of excluding some child of God from his church and his table. But in a creed formed on this principle, it will be difficult to determine what to exclude, and what to retain, or whether we shall retain anything. There are two kinds of essential doctrines—those which are essential to a consistent scheme of evangelical religion, and those a belief of which is essential to piety. The first class of essential doctrines may be pretty accurately ascertained. But who shall tell us precisely what doctrines must be received in order to be a pious person? Who will say that there can be no pious Unitarians, or Universalists? Shall we, then, omit from our creeds the Divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and eternal punishment? Yea, who will pretend that there never was, and never can be, a pious heathen? Some of the Germans tell us that piety attaches only to the feelings, and has no connection whatever with dogma. It is obvious that, on the principle we are considering, a church creed must be a very short one, if indeed any creed at all is possible.

It is not for us to decide into what minds and hearts the grace of God may possibly enter and form a renovated character. We may judge a system of doctrine, and condemn it; but we are not called upon to pass sentence upon the characters of individuals, but must leave them to the just judgment of God.

The question returns, then: What shall the creed of a church contain? What doctrines shall it embrace? Perhaps not the same in all cases. Some regard must be had to circumstances, and to the opinions of those immediately concerned. In cases where the members of a church, or those proposing to become members, are agreed in our Congregational theology and polity, a creed may be more full and explicit than in other cases would be desirable. But in cases where there is some diversity of opinion on minor points, and where a union is intended,—as is the case in many of our new settlements,—a creed may be formed on the union principle, omitting or modifying particular parts, so as to make it acceptable to all.

But in no case should a church creed omit or disguise aught of what may be regarded as the essential doctrines of the gospel—essential, I mean, to a full and consistent scheme of evangelical theology. Such doctrines as the plenary inspiration of the scriptures, the Trinity, the Divinity and atonement of Christ, regeneration by the special influences of the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, and eternal punishment—these and the like doctrines must never be omitted. And if any seemingly pious persons cannot accept such a creed, they have no reason to complain. The church has rights to be respected, as well as they; and if they cannot come into a church formed on the above principles, they may find another where they shall be more at home. In this country, where sects are so numerous, no hardship on this ground is likely to occur.

Some think that the church creeds in common use, which have come down to us from our fathers, are too long, and insist on their being curtailed. In cases of admission to

the church, too much time is taken up in the reading of them. I do not advocate a tediously long creed; it is not necessary. Neither would I advocate a meagrely short one. It should be long enough to set forth explicitly the great doctrines of the gospel; and it will be no detriment to a congregation to hear such a creed read occasionally in public, even if the reading of it should occupy several minutes.

Some persons have thought to obviate the difficulty here suggested by having two creeds. Let the old one stand unaltered, unrenounced; but have a shorter one adapted to be read in public. But there are objections to this expedient. The short one will ultimately supersede the longer. The latter, being laid up on file and never read, will soon be forgotten. Besides, the new members, having never seen, heard, or accepted the old creed, may not consent to be bound by it. If brought forth, at any time, for their reproof or conviction, they have only to say: "*This is no creed for us.*"

It has been made a question, whether a church can properly change its creed, substituting a new one, or one essentially modified, in place of the old. This can be done, undoubtedly, and without embarrassment, in case the church are all united in it. But suppose they are not united—there is a respectable minority opposed to the change. Under these circumstances the case is one of much difficulty, and should, if possible, be avoided. I have known more than one minister dismissed, and the church divided, from this very cause. It is certain that a majority cannot bind a minority, in a case like this. No man can be holden to a creed which he has not freely accepted. A minority may withdraw from a church, on a change of creed, or may be tolerated in it, that is, if they walk orderly in other respects; but on the mere ground of their dissent from the new creed they cannot be excluded. They may still remain in the church, and participate in all its privileges and responsibilities, amenable only to the creed they have adopted.

On the whole, the difficulties are so great of changing a

church creed in opposition to a respectable minority, that it should never be attempted but for the gravest reasons. If the existing creed is radically defective, or positively heretical, a change, with all its hazards, may be necessary. But no change, on the mere ground of taste or of personal preference, should ordinarily be attempted, until it can be done without rending the church.

Of the importance, and even necessity, of church creeds I have sufficiently spoken; and the impression of this fact, I hope, may not be lost. It was a stale artifice of those who prepared the way for another gospel among us in the early part of the present century, to reject and denounce confessions of faith. Creeds were represented as useless and of bad influence; as inconsistent with Christian liberty and with the first principle of Protestantism — the sufficiency of scripture. But these charges, we all now understand, were utterly without foundation. Our creeds were never regarded as the ultimate *standard* of our faith, but only the *expression* of it. We have never substituted them in the place of scripture, but have merely used them, as a matter of convenience, to set forth what we regarded as the true sense of scripture. And what absurdity to pretend that Christians may not study the scriptures for themselves; gather their opinions from them, express them one to another, reduce them to writing, and thus form a creed, and a church on the basis of it, without incurring the reproach of undervaluing and superseding the use of scripture, and encroaching upon the liberty of others.

That indifference to religious truth and dislike of creeds, which has once brought so much mischief upon us, I have feared was beginning to show itself again. Hence the desire of short and imperfect creeds, and a renewal of the old and oft-refuted objections against them. Now against this spirit, wherever it shows itself, we cannot be too cautiously on our guard. Is it not enough that we have once been caught in this way? Shall we consent to fall into the same snare again? "In vain," says the wise man, "is the net spread *in the sight* of any bird."