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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

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

THE CREED AND THE CHRIST

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CATSKILL, NEW YORK

It is written that all things were made through that eternal Word who became the Christ of God, and that in Him all things consist, or, in other words, hold together. Thus the universe declares the glory and the complexity of Christ and raises the questions of creation and consistency. We are led to ask what is the true nature of things and how do they consist in Christ, finding creation both a revelation and an enigma. Innumerable patent facts involve underlying and coherent principles and invite philosophy to discover and record them. This is true in two worlds: the world of science and the world of religion.

The two inquiries, what truth is and how truths agree together, originate Christian creeds. A creed is what the mind makes of truth in its endeavor to find and state a complete and harmonious understanding of it. It is the product of a mind that feels that it needs and must formulate a law of thought. It is a statement of belief that results from the constant effort of the mind to discover and relate to each other the basic truths of religion. We organize truth as we do action; our thought as our work. Eagerly as men search for knowledge they strive for system. Comprehensiveness is each thinker's dream, and coherency his aim.

The mind of our day is not favorable to the creeds of Christendom. There is a good deal of joy in the world over the idea that they are "crumbling." Theology is now regarded very generally as the product of the theorizings of an unpractical and outgrown age. It has been largely superseded by sociology. The study of the love of God has given place to the study of the love of men. There is a prevailing contempt for revealed truth that is a following of the way of Cain; for it assumes a sonship to God and a brotherhood of man which do not exist, and which can come to be only by submission to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Evolutionary doctrine

can indulge sin and still feel that it is progressing. Not so Scripture doctrine. The difference explains the popularity of the one and the unpopularity of the other. So it is that theology is unfashionable. Thus is the Church tempted to abandon her teaching function. Here is the explanation of the decline and even the degeneration of the religious press. The public weariness of religious creeds has been well expressed by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, in her verse:—

“So many Gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind!
While just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs.”

An illustration of this view was furnished in the case of the minister who sought to impress upon his young daughter the value of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. He gave her five dollars upon her agreement to commit that document to memory. After a few months the student came to her father with a relieved air, saying, “Here, father, here is two fifty, I’ve learned half of it!” It is not generally conceded that the way to learn “the art of being kind” lies through creed and catechism.

And yet, despite the neglect and scorn of men, creeds are useful things, so much so that every man has one; and the man who attacks one creed always proposes another. Creeds are not peculiar to religion. The man who does not believe in creeds always begins his creed recital by saying so. Every man puts his theory of life into terms. Every cult has its appropriate lingo. All fads are labeled. When we hear a man state that his conscience is his God, we know that he declares that he is governed by a decalogue of his own make, a set of uncorrected opinions that constitutes his catechism. It would be hard to find a man so dead as to be unable to announce his dogmatism with an “I believe” or an “I don’t believe,” an apostle’s creed or an agnostic’s. Even amid the disappointments of creed-making, and after our reactions towards the simplicity that is in life and in Christ, we have felt compelled to return to our labors upon a perfect system of thought by a conviction that complexity

cannot be sacrificed to simplicity. It does not make Christianity wider to limit the scope of its thought. Had not Paul claimed the whole field of thought for it, objectors would have denounced its childishness and insufficiency. And so, after we throw away our creeds we go and pick them up again and renew our cogitations.

For a creed is a necessary thing. It is necessary to confess faith in order to support life. Religion without form is void, and without wise restraint and direction it branches off into unbalanced growth, or into strong delusion and wild fanaticism. Very real and very dreadful errors are abroad, and the steady light of the Christian confessions, shining above the tumultuous and wandering waves of human thought, has guided many a doctrine-driven sailor past the rocks of spiritual shipwreck and to an anchorage in the truth of Christ. A disciple must set out with one idea, but a teacher must begin with a working creed. Rules of thought are the tools of the schoolmaster. They perform a rudimentary and temporary, but a real and valuable service in religious education. The active life and the contemplative life are sisters, each can supplement the other, but each must form a scheme of thought in order to have a scheme of life. It is this truth of thought as a feeder of life that has made creed seem so supremely important. Why does heresy seem so much worse than sin? Why does a transgression of the law of thought appear so much more grave than a breach of the law of action? Because creed is regarded as the tree, and action as the fruit of it, and it is felt that there is hope of better product while the tree remains good, but none if life is poisoned at its source. It is wholesome to hear a Scotch boy recite his catechism, and there is more promise in a gospel ministry that begins in the acceptance of the creeds of Christendom than there is in one that starts with a denial of them. We believe in the Holy Catholic Church because we believe in the Holy Ghost, and we have hope for that Church when we hear a man say so. We need the credal statement to support the hope.

But, however useful and necessary a creed may be, it

is always an imperfect thing. Like the law of Moses, it makes nothing perfect but the bringing in of a better hope. For it is ever, like that law, pointing to a consummation. A Christian creed is only a guide to Christ, a crutch to support imperfection on its way to perfection. It is not a thing to rest in or with finality to rest upon. Christianity is not "creedism." To rest in a creed will provide, as did the ancient resting in the Jewish law, a yoke of bondage, rather than a way to freedom. It will fetter the mind, but not free it. It will shut the ears instead of opening them. It will define too far and conclude too soon, forgetting that even Paul knew in part and prophesied in part. Of making many creeds there is no end, but that there is no perfect creed in the world is simply a fact. There is not even a creed upon which all Christians can agree. These things are true after all the centuries of laborious thought because of the limitations that are upon the case. We are limited in creed making by our ignorance. We know in part. The finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite mind and map out its thoughts, or know the end from the beginning; therefore there cannot be a complete and final religious creed upon earth. Again, a reason for our limited agreement lies in the inability of men at different stages of development to think alike. No one who is progressing can maintain the same viewpoint. Those who are apart cannot see together. Hence in the Church we have the same variety of views that appears among the saints in the Bible. Even such truth and fulness of systematic thought as we can attain unto and such agreement as we can reach in the Church are liable to bear another mark of imperfection, the mark of the arrested development before referred to. A common creed is likely to be held in the letter rather than in the spirit, to be written upon tables of stone rather than upon loving hearts, a sad nullification of it. Better an anarchy of individualism in interpretation than a superstitious uniformity of belief. Better a creedless heart than a heartless creed. Truth is nothing when it is apart from life. Wherefore, whatever uniformity of expression of faith may be essential

to denominational orthodoxy, we must concede to the Church universal great variety of statement and progressiveness of interpretation in the matter of creed. We must regard the principles of doctrine that are well settled in the denominational mind as also subject to endlessly progressive applications, and we must, even with regard to our denominational standards, allow for the temporary, changeable, inconclusive character of interpretations of them. Creeds must grow, and we must not stunt them; for a dwarfed creed will mean a dwarfed Church. It will signify a cramped and unprogressive mind. We must beware of perverted creeds. It has been said that they gender bondage instead of progress and become footbinders instead of helpers of progress. Cursed with the leaven of their own ideas and inventions, the creeds of the Pharisees and those of the Sadducees were both to be avoided. Both of them were wrong, the legalist and the liberalist were both extremely legal and literal. Neither one discerned how largely he was substituting his own doctrine for God's doctrine. The attempt to find life in a creed instead of by means of it, the mistaking of merely intellectual conceptions of things spiritual for the truth, the merely human additions and subtractions with relation to divine revelation, the undertaking to express the full and the final truth, the endeavor to reach every possible act of life with prescription, leaving nothing to the spirit, the effort to believe too much at once, the error of thinking that God will reveal Himself to the merely critical faculty—all these have often made creeds more hurtful than helpful, and have created a basis of persecution instead of a path of education. As late as the time of Horace Bushnell, if not later, history records serious, divisive, and injurious disputations over trivialities of difference in religious belief. Records of such petty wars cause readers of today to exclaim with Emerson, "Why so hot, little man?"

Yet, though imperfect and often misused, the creeds of Christendom are not to be judged by the abuse of them. History has justified them by recording the demonstrations of their truth and usefulness that have appeared

in their good fruits. They have expressed Christian thought and excited it to further expressions. They have preserved and communicated spiritual interpretations. They have been purified by fiery disputations. They have grown with the development of Christian ideas. They have become more than lessons in the primer of Christian life and have served for high expressions of the consciousness of that life. The evangelical creeds of the Churches have a value that has been fully attested in the progress of religion, and they have therefore secured a general agreement among Christians as to the essentials and substance of Christian doctrine. The great lines on which the universe runs and the great destinations are clear, though we must wait for the details of remote scenery until we reach them. That we have been running on these lines, that we have known what are the principles of the oracles of God and the doctrine of Christ, has been abundantly proved by a noble and splendid history of Christian experience and achievement. Christian truth was sufficiently known at first to produce peerless characters. The Church has never, from that time to this, lost the possession of it or failed to illustrate its power. We know in part, yet we know. As far as we have proved our way by attainment of truth and its fruit we hold fast. We are not in search of a recipe for Christianity, or a new gospel, or another creed. We bring out of our treasure things new, but also things old. We do not cut down the tree whose leaves have healed. When we want a creed we know where to find it.

And we still want it. The creeds of our Churches still serve the needs and purposes of an imperfect time. We are exceedingly filled with the contempt of the world for the Christian symbols, but we retain our reasons for respecting them. We consent to the Apostles' Creed, to the Nicene Creed, to the Athanasian Creed, to the multitude of creeds descendant from them, not because they convey to us the philosophies of men, but because they impart to us the mind of Christ; not because they perfectly or completely interpret to us the Scriptures, but because they are the fullest and the best interpretations

that we have. We know them by their fruits. Plymouth Rock is still the basis of American ideals; it still supports our history, for our history gloriously supports it. The Puritans were sometimes narrow, hard and harsh in their faith, but it was a faith that took hold on universal and eternal principles. They only needed to get it by heart. Paul has been grievously misunderstood. In that expansion of the gospel teachings that we find in his epistles, wherein, having preached the gospel to the world, he declares the whole counsel of God to the Church, he, more than anyone, insists upon love as the worth of truth, spirit as the value of creed. Through all his writings, still hard to be understood, glows the warmth of that divine love that makes truth live.

Of all the Christian creeds, that one which is known as the Apostles' Creed has dwelt longest and most generally in the heart of the Church. It has found, and it still finds, the widest public expression. It is the most popular Christian confession of faith. This not because of its apostolic origin, for, in its present form it appeared centuries after the apostolic era, and probably arose in its earlier forms long after that era had closed. Not because of its completeness, for it leaves unnoticed or merely implied many essential Christian truths. But it is comparatively brief; it expresses truth rather than requires it; its terms are not harsh and definite, but large, generous and broad; it seems an adequate utterance of the spirit, full of heavenly atmosphere. We place it among creeds as we place the Lord's Prayer among prayers, and we print them together. We love it more than the more scholastic productions of creedmakers. It is not so much our study as our joy. It is our song, rather than our rule. It is not truth in irons, but truth in living characters. It could be figured, like the Winged Victory. To quote the Rev. Dr. R. S. Storrs, "With the hymns came as well the great Creeds:—hymns themselves, 'to be said or sung,' some rubrics say, but better 'to be sung,' if only this be done by the whole congregation, with sufficient instrumental and vocal assistance to invigorate and sustain. This is the earliest function of the Creeds. They

are not what in modern times are called specifically 'Confessions of Faith' though in the large sense they are surely such, and of noblest significance. But they are not careful philosophical definitions of particulars of doctrine, precisely outlined, systematically arranged. In the Creeds—the 'Apostolic' from the Western Church, or the 'Nicene' from the Eastern—the great facts of His religion, as He understood them, were expressed by the Christian, to be triumphantly uttered in worship. They were born of experience, augmented by its growth, with its tremendous diapasons rolling through them: a nobler origin than if either or both had come from the pens of dictating apostles. And surely there are no other compositions of human minds superior to these in essential and mighty melody, in spiritual power, or in the memories which cling to their crowded lines. One can scarcely read the Apostles' Creed—which the Westminster divines added to their catechism, which they who prepared, or who afterward adopted, the Heidelberg catechism gladly received, which is in the fullest sense ecumenical and perennial—without feeling afresh the wonder of that mysterious energy which built it to its compact completeness through stormy ages: starting with the great confession of Peter, finding a sovereign shaping law in the baptismal formula, leaving traces of its working in Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus, more largely in Tertullian, not articulating the creed to the world till perhaps the fourth century, not rounding it out till still later in the ampler and final form which now is familiar; but all the time, from first to last, holding unabated the primitive faith in the Divine facts, and making those facts the song and the strength of those who received them. Certainly, one cannot thoughtfully read it without being carried upon its majestic affirmative words to the day when the fire flamed for the Christian, unless he would cast a pinch of incense on the altar of the emperor, and when the answer came ringing back from man or maid, before prefect and people, 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord!' It was, in very deed, age after age, 'the hymn of the martyrs.'" Dr. Storrs

quotes Luther's estimate of the Apostles' Creed in the following words, "I believe the words of the Apostles' Creed to be the work of the Holy Ghost; the Holy Spirit alone could have enunciated things so grand, in terms so precise, so expressive, so powerful. No human creature could have done it, nor all the human creatures of ten thousand worlds. I cannot too highly admire or venerate it." In his "Creeds of Christendom," Dr. Schaff (as quoted by Dr. Storrs) declares, "The Apostles' Creed is not a logical statement of abstract doctrines, but a profession of living facts and saving truths. It is a liturgical poem, an act of worship. 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. The Apostles' Creed is no piece of mosaic, but an organic unit, an instinctive work of art, in the same sense as the Gloria in Excelsis, the Te Deum, and the classical prayers and hymns of the Church."

Yet the best of creeds must change, and at last they must all pass away in Christ. For Christ is the end of creeds for righteousness to every one that believeth. Man is not appointed to live by any system of God's words, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. When life has grown to perfection all its expressions will be divinely true and all its acts will be divinely right. The law will be written upon the mind and heart, and it will be fulfilled in the fruit of the lips and the work of the hands naturally, from within, rather than from without, and in ever varying and new manifestations. As that which is perfect comes that which is in part must vanish away. Creeds must change because they must shrink. They must grow in substance yet decrease in size. We have spoken too far and too much. We need in our creeds the brevity, simplicity, and condensation of the Lord's Prayer. Our creeds may change in expression without sacrifice of their essential character.

Religion is old, but it need not be old-fashioned. Whatever forms the Spirit bursts must pass away, whatever forms He needs for new expression must come. Creeds will not pass away from public use and from the Church, because new generations are ever needing schooling and ever being schooled, but creeds are constantly passing away from individual use with the growth of faith and life in souls. Hearts are ever coming to an end of forms of law and means of education. Not, indeed, in any abolition of the letter, but in the filling up of it in Christ. In the unleavened creed of Christ, creeds pass as the Bible comes, for any systematizing of the Bible is an alteration of it, and as we grow to be men of God the Bible is enough, and we are governed by a word rather than by a programme. Elements of thought become fused in a love that knows. What we think of *Christ* is of great importance. Not our opinions of *truth*, but of our *Christ*, and then His mind, as fast as He can give it to us. God put everything into a Word. Christ summed up all Truth in Himself. He summarized the Scriptures in Himself. Like John the Baptist, the Scriptures are not that Light, but are sent to bear witness of that Light. To Paul to believe was Christ. Christ was his creed. Knowing about Christ gave place to knowing Him: Creed to acquaintance. The Apostles' Creed brings us as near to Christ as creeds can bring us. But before Christ all human systems pale away like village lights before the rising sun. In vigils of thought men put their ideas together, but buzzing insect arguments are all ended by the dawn. As we stand before Christ creeds are swallowed up of life and school books are thrown away. Every image-maker must become an iconoclast as he progresses, every bubble-blower must see his beautiful spheres dissolve; for creeds are schoolmasters, to bring us to Christ, and as the Master appears, the schoolmaster retires. As fast as we put on Christ we put off creeds, as Christ grows great we forget John the Baptist, as Christ reveals Himself to us we are content to part with our poor conceptions, and to let "our little systems" be ephemeral. The Apostles' Creed is a way for freedom to walk in, and

it will last as long as any, while we are on our way to the creedless city.

The present is, theologically, a most interesting time. What a scene of confusion attends the building of a church! What a miserable moment is that of the tuning of an orchestra! To many the Church seems to be passing away in disarray and dissonance. But we may be sure of this, the divine Architect is carrying out His plan; and of this, the harmony is about to set in; and of this, the synagogue is going, but the Church is going on; the Church is passing from the vanity of mere thoughts to the realities of thoughtful love. And we may be sure of this, to that faith which is the mind's penitence and the heart's surrender Christ will continue to reveal Himself as the living and sufficient Truth. He will say to the soul, variously and with regard to all things, "I AM," and the soul will answer, "Thou art," and this will be its confession of faith and its creed.

Meanwhile, all the way to the creedless city, the city that hath foundations precious and beautiful, the city without candle or light of sun and yet without night, the city without temple or liturgy, the city where God will be all in all, the city where the very walls shall palpitate with life, Christ will sup with us and we with Him; He will walk with us and talk with us by the way; instead of creed it will be communion. He will guide us by His counsel until, as Paul has written, "we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ": until we all speak the truth in love: being no longer children, tossed to and fro among the creeds of time, but grown up unto the truth as it is in Jesus. So, though it is as Browning has put it:—

"Sorrow is hard to bear and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe."

Yet it is also as he expresses it in another thought:—

"God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear,
The rest may reason and welcome, 'tis we musicians *know*."

True Christian progress enables us to have the mind of Christ, and to say, at last, with Paul, "I know Him whom I have believed." As Christ is truth and is love, having his creed in Himself, so we, as we become like Him, will do by nature the things of truth and love, the things of a living, a loving creed. "Our rules being so deep within us," as one has put it, "that we shall be unconscious of them." The proper study of mankind is Christ, who said, "I am the Truth." Else we are ever learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.

There went a man unto the Word of God,
"Tell me the truth," he said, and answer came,
"Ask of thyself, and judge thou what is truth."
There went another, "Tell me what is truth."
Ask of thy brethren, they will witness bear."
And yet another sought, and he was sent
To search a record, for things written there.
But all the while the Word said to Himself,
And then, at last, to them, "I AM THE TRUTH."

In our restless search for truth may we take His yoke upon us and find rest for our souls. There is no other way of discovering truth. Has He been so long time with us, and yet have we not known *Him*?