

THE APOSTLES' CREED

from *The Creeds of Christendom*¹

by
Philip Schaff

The Apostles' Creed, or Symbolum Apostolicum, is, as to its form, not the production of the apostles, as was formerly believed, but an admirable popular summary of the apostolic teaching, and in full harmony with the spirit and even the letter of the New Testament.²

I. Character and Value

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 facts, 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 Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit (*in Deum Patrem, in Jesum Christum, in Spiritum Sanctum*); the chief stress being laid on the second article, the supernatural birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Then, changing the language (*credo in* for *credo* with the simple accusative), the Creed professes to believe 'the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.' It is by far the best popular summary of the Christian faith ever made within so brief a space. It still surpasses all later symbols for catechetical and liturgical purposes, especially as a profession of candidates for baptism and church membership. 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. It can never be superseded for popular use in church and school.

At the same time, it must be admitted that the very simplicity and brevity of this Creed, which so admirably adapt it for all classes of Christians and for public worship, make it insufficient as a regulator of public doctrine for a more advanced stage of theological knowledge. As it is confined to the fundamental articles, and expresses them in plain Scripture terms, it admits of an indefinite expansion by the scientific mind of the Church. Thus the Nicene Creed gives clearer and stronger expression to the doctrine of Christ's divinity against the Arians, the Athanasian Creed to the whole doctrine of the Trinity and of Christ's person against the various heresies of the post-Nicene age. The Reformation Creeds are more explicit on the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures and the doctrines of sin and grace, which are either passed by or merely implied in the Apostles' Creed.

II. Origin

1 The Creeds of Christendom, by Dr. Philip Schaff, went through six editions. The first four were published in 1876, 1878, 1880, and 1884. The fifth edition was a reprint of the fourth without any changes. The sixth edition was published by his son, David S. Schaff, in 1931. The material on the Apostles' Creed remained unchanged from the first edition.

2 The footnotes of Dr. Schaff are omitted.

As to the origin of the Apostles' Creed, it no doubt gradually grew out of the confession of Peter, Matt. 16:16, which furnished its nucleus (the article on Jesus Christ), and out of the baptismal formula, which determined the trinitarian order and arrangement. It cannot be traced to an individual author. It is the product of the Western Catholic Church (as the Nicene Creed is that of the Eastern Church) within the first four centuries. It is not of primary, apostolic, but of secondary, ecclesiastical inspiration. It is not a word of God to men, but a word of men to God, in response to his revelation. It was originally and essentially a *baptismal confession*, growing out of the inner life and practical needs of early Christianity. It was explained to the catechumens at the last stage of their preparation, professed by them at baptism, often repeated, with the Lord's Prayer, for private devotion, and afterwards introduced into public service. It was called by the ante-Nicene fathers 'the rule of faith,' 'the rule of truth,' 'the apostolic tradition,' 'the apostolic preaching,' afterwards 'the symbol of faith.' But this baptismal Creed was at first not precisely the same. It assumed different shapes and forms in different congregations. Some were longer, some shorter; some declarative, some interrogative in the form of questions and answers. Each of the larger churches adapted the nucleus of the apostolic faith to its peculiar circumstances and wants; but they all agreed in the essential articles of faith, in the general order of arrangement on the basis of the baptismal formula, and in the prominence given to Christ's death and resurrection. We have an illustration in the modern practice of Independent or Congregational and Baptist churches in America, where the same liberty of framing particular congregational creeds ('covenants,' as they are called, or forms of profession and engagement, when members are received into full communion) is exercised to a much larger extent than it was in the primitive ages.

The first accounts we have of these primitive creeds are merely fragmentary. The ante-Nicene fathers give us not the exact and full formula, but only some articles with descriptions, defenses, explications, and applications. The creeds were committed to memory, but not to writing. This fact is to be explained from the 'Secret Discipline' of the ante-Nicene Church. From fear of profanation and misconstruction by unbelievers (not, as some suppose, in imitation of the ancient heathen Mysteries), the celebration of the sacraments and the baptismal creed, as a part of the baptismal act, were kept secret among the communicant members until the Church triumphed in the Roman Empire.

The first writer in the West who gives us the text of the Latin creed, with a commentary, is Rufinus, towards the close of the fourth century.

The most complete or most popular forms of the baptismal creed in use from that time in the West were those of the churches of Rome, Aquileja, Milan, Ravenna, Carthage, and Hippo. They differ but little. Among these, again, the Roman formula gradually gained general acceptance in the West for its intrinsic excellence, and on account of the commanding position of the Church of Rome. We know the Latin text from Rufinus (390), and the Greek from Marcellus of Ancyra (336-341). The Greek text is usually regarded as a translation, but is probably older than the Latin, and may date from the second century, when the Greek language prevailed in the Roman congregation.

This Roman creed was gradually enlarged by several clauses from older or contemporaneous forms, viz., the article 'descended into Hades' (taken from the Creed of Aquileja), the predicate 'catholic' or 'general,' in the article on the Church (borrowed from Oriental creeds), 'the communion of saints' (from Gallican sources), and the concluding 'life everlasting' (probably from the symbols of the churches of Ravenna and Antioch). These additional clauses were no doubt part of the general faith, since they are taught in the Scriptures, but they were first expressed in local creeds, and it was some time before they found a place in the authorized formula.

If we regard, then, the *present* text of the Apostles' Creed as a complete whole, we can hardly trace it beyond the sixth, certainly not before the close of the fifth century, and its triumph over all the other forms in the Latin Church was not completed till the eighth century, or about the time when the bishops

of Rome strenuously endeavored to conform the liturgies of the Western churches to the Roman order. But if we look at the several articles of the Creed separately, they are all of Nicene or ante-Nicene origin, while its kernel goes back to the apostolic age. All the facts and doctrines which it contains, are in entire agreement with the New Testament. And this is true even of those articles which have been most assailed in recent times, as the supernatural conception of our Lord (comp. Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35), the descent into Hades (comp. Luke 23:43; Acts 2:31; 1 Pet. 3:19; 4:6), and the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:20 sqq., and other places).

The rationalistic opposition to the Apostles' Creed and its use in the churches is therefore an indirect attack upon the New Testament itself. But it will no doubt outlive these assaults, and share in the victory of the Bible over all forms of unbelief.

III. The Original Roman and Greek Version Contrasted with the Received Form

I add a table, with critical notes,³ to show the difference between the original Roman Creed, as given by Rufinus in Latin (about A.D. 390), and by Marcellus in Greek (A.D. 336-341), and the received form of the Apostles' Creed, which came into general use in the seventh or eighth century. The additions are enclosed in brackets.

The Old Roman Form	The Received Form
1. I believe in God the Father Almighty.	1. I believe in God the Father Almighty [<i>Maker of heaven and earth</i>].
2. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;	2. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
3. Who was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary;	3. Who was [<i>conceived</i>] by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary;
4. Was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried;	4. [<i>Suffered</i>] under Pontius Pilate, and was crucified [<i>dead</i>], and buried [<i>He descended into Hell (Hades)</i>];
5. The third day he rose from the dead;	5. The third day he rose from the dead;
6. He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;	6. He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand of [<i>God</i>] the Father [<i>Almighty</i>];
7. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead;	7. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead;
8. And in the Holy Ghost	8. [<i>I believe</i>] in the Holy Ghost;
9. The Holy Church	9. The Holy [<i>Catholic</i>] Church [<i>The communion of saints</i>];
10. The forgiveness of sins;	10. The forgiveness of sins;
11. The resurrection of the body (flesh).	11. The resurrection of the body (flesh);
	12. [<i>And the life everlasting</i>].

³ These notes are omitted.