

CHRISTENDOM'S CREEDS: THEIR RELEVANCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

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I. ORIGIN OF THE CREEDS

A creed, or rule of faith, is a concise statement of what one must believe in order to be a Christian. Certain fathers in the West, beginning with Cyprian, introduced the term "symbol" (i.e., "sign" or "instrument of identification") to denote those articles of faith that differentiated the Christian from the pagan or Jew. Ostensibly the Church's creedal formulae were grounded in the Word of God. Augustine in his treatise, "On the Creed," defined the Symbol as a brief compendium of divine truths that lie scattered across the pages of Scripture.

Significantly, Christianity is the only major religion that has drafted detailed creedal statements. Biblical and post-Biblical Judaism confessed Yahweh's absolute uniqueness through its *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut 6:4). A simple creed patterned on the *Shema* was employed in the liturgy of the Qumran community. But neither Islam nor such eastern religions as Hinduism, Buddhism or Shintoism have developed detailed creedal formulae.

The genesis of the Church's formal symbols resides in the protocreedal statements of faith and worship that lie embedded in the NT. Paul, recalling Jesus' arraignment before the Roman governor (John 18:33-38), declares that the Lord "in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession" (1 Tim 6:13). The Lord himself commanded prospective disciples to publicly confess their faith (Matt 10:32-33). Thus Nathaniel (John 1:49), Martha (11:27), Peter (Matt 16:16) and the Roman officer (27:54) confessed Jesus to be God's promised Messiah.

Later when post-Pentecost believers had gained a clear and settled faith they pointedly acknowledged Jesus as "Lord" (1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9), thereby attributing to the Nazarene the sovereign deity that Israel reserved for Yahweh alone. Further reflection on God's saving revelation in Jesus led the Church to confess further dimensions of Christ's reality. Paul in Rom 10:9-10 outlines three essentials of a confession that saves: belief in Jesus' deity, his atoning death, and his resurrection. Hymnodic texts such as Rom 1:4, 1 Cor 15:3-5 and 1 Pet 3:18 undoubtedly reflect the protocreedal formula common in the early Church, "Jesus died and rose." According to 1 Cor 8:6 Christians confessed God the Father as creator and sustainer of the universe and Jesus Christ as the divine agent of this cosmic activity. Hence Schaff is quite correct when he states, "In a certain sense the Christian church has never been without a creed."¹

But the NT contains a further level of protocreedal formulae—namely, a convert's confession of Christ at baptism. Paul in 1 Tim 6:12-13 commends Timothy for "the good confession" (note the definite article) he made in the presence of

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¹P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, 1919), 1. 5.

many witnesses—no doubt on the occasion of his baptism. An interpolated text preserved in a “Western” recension of the account of the Ethiopian chamberlain probably reflects the early Christian baptismal rite. When the Ethiopian asked, “What is to prevent my being baptized?” Philip replied, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” Whereupon the convert confessed, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:36-37).

The Old Roman Symbol, an early-second-century formula (A.D. 140, Harnack) developed by the Church at Rome, is undoubtedly an expanded baptismal confession. The earliest form of the Symbol develops the primitive confession of Christ along trinitarian lines: “I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ Jesus his Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh.” The apostolic fathers reflect what J. N. D. Kelly calls “quasi-creedal scraps,” and the apologists a growing corpus of teaching that represents the essence of Christianity. In the writings of Irenaeus in the second century and Tertullian in the third we witness the development of a simple “rule of truth” or “rule of faith” that converts confessed at baptism.² The so-called Apostles’ Creed, which slowly evolved from the Old Roman Symbol, originally served as a confession of faith at baptism—so the singular “I” and the triune form analogous to our Lord’s threefold baptismal formula in Matt 28:19. Later the Church gave the Apostles’ Creed a central place in its corporate worship.

In the fourth century the simple baptismal confessions were succeeded by more elaborate doctrinal creeds that mirror the Church’s corporate faith-consciousness. With the rise of heterodox teaching the Church was forced to examine and articulate those faith commitments it regarded as non-negotiable. We include among the Church’s principal doctrinal formulae the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon and the Athanasian Creed. In its struggles against the Arians, who postulated a creaturely Christ, the Church at Nicaea (A.D. 325) with some later modifications affirmed the co-equality of Christ and the Spirit with the Father. Building on earlier Palestinian and Syrian baptismal confessions, Nicaea confessed Christ’s eternal generation, pre-existence, incarnation, resurrection, ascension and second coming.

In the fifth century the Church was forced to address Apollinarian, Nestorian and Monophysite misrepresentations of the union of deity and humanity in the God-man. Thus the Church at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) confessed the reality of Christ’s deity and humanity, the integrity of the union of the two natures in the one person, and the preservation of the characteristics of each nature “without confusion, change, division or separation.”

The final symbol, the so-called Athanasian Creed, evolved as a means of countering modalistic teaching, which reduced the Son and Spirit to divinities of lesser rank. The latter creed, which developed from certain expositions of the Apostles’ Creed and which appeared in southern France about A.D. 490, is in two parts. The first section (vv 3-28) presents a rational explication of the doctrine of the Trinity, confessing the tripersonality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the unity of the divine essence. The second section (vv 29-44) rehearses the main outlines of the Chalcedonian Christology.

²For a full account of the emergence of formal creedal statements in the second- and third-century Church see B. Shelley, *By What Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1965).

These four doctrinal formulae—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Definition and the Creed of Athanasius—represent the bedrock conviction of the early Church. Their common focus is the redeeming incarnation of Christ, the Lord and very Son of God. The Church employed these creedal statements not only to counter heresy but also to regulate baptism, order its corporate worship and shape its catechetical instruction. Our next task is to assess the authority accorded these creeds by the main branches of the Church.

II. AUTHORITY OF THE CREEDS

Historically, Catholic Christianity has held that the ultimate theological authority is the corpus of living tradition. The Greek Orthodox Church ascribes total authority to the decrees of the seven ecumenical councils, from the first Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) to the second at Nicaea (A.D. 787). Although the eastern churches have never accepted the western doctrinal creeds (rejecting especially the *filioque* clause), they regard the Nicene Creed in its Constantinopolitan revision as the infallible rule of the faith.

Rome, on the other hand, claims infallibility for all the pronouncements of the Church's magisterium. Christ founded the Church and ordained that it should be the infallible guardian and interpreter of the truth (Matt 18:20; John 16:13; Luke 22:32). Inspired by the Spirit of God, the Church's councils cannot err. Justinian I (d. 565) regarded the teachings of the first four ecumenical councils as the Word of God and their canons as the law of the empire. Gregory the Great (d. 604) placed the decrees of the first four councils on a par with the teaching of the four gospels. Medieval Catholicism, in its full bloom, elevated the creeds above the Bible. The Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were known as "the three symbols." According to Ludolf of Saxony "the first symbol was made for instruction in the faith, the second for explanation of the faith, and the third for defense of the faith." Hence from the perspective of Rome the ancient creedal formulae contain truths immediately revealed by God and thus authoritative for all time.

Whereas Rome regarded the creeds as oracles from God, the Protestant Reformers accepted the Apostles' Creed and the decrees of the first four councils because of their agreement with Holy Scripture, the only rule of faith and practice. Luther held a somewhat lower view of the creeds vis-à-vis the Bible than leaders of other branches of the Reformation Church. Yet Luther appreciatively expounded the creeds both in sermons and in his Small and Large Catechism. In a sermon on Rom 11:33-36 Luther said the following about the Apostles' Creed:

This confession of faith we did not make or invent, neither did the fathers of the church before us. But as the bee gathers honey from many a beautiful and delectible flower, so this creed has been collected in commendable brevity from the books of the beloved prophets and apostles, that is, from the entire Holy Scriptures.³

Calvin likewise accepted the formulae of the early ecumenical councils: "I venerate them from my heart, and would have all of them held in due honor."⁴ Their teachings are holy because they contain the authentic interpretation of

³Trinity Sunday Sermon, 1535. WA, 41. 275.

⁴J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ix.1.

Scripture against the cavils of the heretics. Calvin was convinced that no better forum existed for the determination of right doctrine than "a council of true bishops" guided by the Spirit of Christ.⁵ Yet he concedes that the Church has known faithful councils and faithless councils. To distinguish between the two, Calvin proposed several tests. The intentions of a council and the fidelity of its members must be weighed. But ultimately the deliberations of a council must be measured against the norm of Scripture. In Calvin's judgment, the formulae of "that golden age" from Nicaea to Chalcedon satisfy these criteria. Certain later decrees stem from a corrupt era of the Church and must be set aside as unlawful. In sum, then, Calvin held that the formulae produced by the faithful councils warrant the Church's highest respect.

Anglicanism identified Scripture as the ultimate test of truth, although accorded considerable importance to the historical voice of the Church. Thus Article 7 of the Thirty-Nine Articles reads, "The three creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius, and that commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by the most certain warrants of Holy Scripture." A. C. Headlam evaluates the Church of England's estimate of the creeds in these words: "The witness of the early church has great authority in corroborating what Scripture has handed down and in telling us the proportions of the Christian faith."⁶

In their quest for radical renewal of the Church the Puritans emphasized the Word of God above all human traditions. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) refers to the Word of God as the supreme judge of "all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men" (I.x), seeing that "symbols or councils since the apostles' times . . . may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice" (XXXI.iv). Yet the Shorter Catechism (1647) closes with a recitation of the Apostles' Creed (alongside the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer), and describes the Creed in an addendum as "a brief sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the Churches of Christ."⁷

III. DEPRECIATION OF THE CREEDS

It is clear that historically the main branches of Christendom upheld the creeds as faithful synopses of Biblical truth. However, radical subjectivism introduced by the theological enlightenment (1650-1800) led to a gradual depreciation of their validity. Stimulated by a burgeoning scientism and by man's frenzied quest for "release from his self-incurred tutelage" (Kant), and facilitated by the decay of eighteenth-century Protestant scholasticism, rationalistic religion sought emancipation from every ecclesiastical authority, including the creeds.

Few critics have done more to undermine confidence in the creeds than Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), the renowned historian of dogma. Harnack postulated that the simple, nonmetaphysical religion of Jesus was corrupted by the assimilation of alien Greek philosophical concepts. What Harnack called the "acute secu-

⁵Ibid., IV.ix.13.

⁶A. C. Headlam, *Christian Theology* (Oxford, 1934) 82.

⁷P. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3. 704.

larization" of Christianity began with the formation of the Logos Christology, developed with the Apostles' Creed, and culminated in the Nicene dogma of the Trinity and the Chalcedonian dogma of the Christ. "This development," Harnack argued, effected "the definite transformation of the rule of faith into the compendium of a Greek philosophical system."⁸ Thus the whole Catholic creedal deposit of Trinity, incarnation and atonement must be discarded as the first step toward a return to an authentic, nondogmatic religion. In his 1902 essay, *The Essence of Christianity*, Harnack exulted in the fact that his was a religion "without priests, without dogma, without sacraments, without liturgy, a truly spiritual religion."

In our own century Cecil John Cadoux, the British theologian, followed Harnack in claiming that the Nicene Creed, for instance, "has made many weighty additions to the simple profession of faith in Christ."⁹ Modern Christians find little historical evidence for such dogmas as Jesus' pre-existence, virgin birth and bodily resurrection. Cadoux said of the fathers who framed the creeds: "Their cosmology was geocentric, their eschatology in origin Jewish, their philosophy Stoic or Platonic: their views of historical evidence, Scriptural authority, and human personality were of necessity such as cannot be adopted by us today."¹⁰ Such considerations, Cadoux concludes, release us from any serious consideration of the ancient formulae.

It is evident that the creeds retain little cash value in the entire modern liberal tradition. Existentialist sympathizers of Tillich, Bultmann, and J. A. T. Robinson, who plead the mythical character of the incarnation, cross, resurrection and second coming, regard the creeds as curious relics of a superstitious age. One recalls Bultmann's claim that Jesus is the divinely-appointed messenger of the kingdom (he is not God in the sense of Nicaea or Chalcedon), or Robinson's assertion that the supernaturalist framework of the Chalcedonian and Athanasian Creeds is incomprehensible to the modern mind.

Gordon Kaufman's claim that the sole arbiter of truth is the theologian's historical judgment also tends to evacuate the creeds of their validity and relevance. He argues that "the theologian . . . neither has the right simply to reproduce the earliest documentary witnesses (the Biblical accounts), nor merely to express the consensus of the Christian community; he must present his own understanding of the act of God to which church and Bible also witness."¹¹ The work of the theologian is analogous to that of the historian. "Just as the historian often finds it necessary to correct both his primary and secondary sources . . . in the light of the reconstruction which he finally produces, so the theologian frequently needs to reinterpret and amend the portrayal of Jesus Christ which he finds in Scripture and tradition."¹² Kaufman concedes that something can be learned from Christians of other ages. However,

⁸A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (London, 1896-1899), 2. 380.

⁹C. J. Cadoux, *Catholicism and Christianity* (New York, 1929) 238.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹¹G. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York, 1969) 70.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 71.

our efforts and our seeing must finally be our own. We are 20th century men, who know modern physics and psychoanalysis, Communist tyranny and Hiroshima, Freud and Marx, Einstein and Hitler; but we must seek to grasp God's historical act in terms *we* can understand and accept and believe.¹³

Randolf Crump Miller rounds out our survey of modern Protestant attitudes toward the creeds. According to Miller, critical analysis reveals that the ancient formulae were based on "bad science, confused theology, and an outmoded view of Scripture."¹⁴ Thus the creeds must not be used as final tests of doctrine. Nevertheless, they are not entirely useless. "When the creeds are seen as symbols of a common commitment rather than as a guide for specific beliefs, they serve a liturgical purpose that is effective today."¹⁵

The Local Church of Witness Lee, while claiming to be ruthlessly Biblical, radically depreciates the ancient creeds. Witness Lee, Gene Ford and others argue that the end of the first century marks the genesis of the Church's doctrinal and moral decline. Hence "the historic Christian Church" is, in fact, the degraded, apostate Church of Christendom. The conciliar creeds merely reflect the character of a dead and degraded Church.

On the Catholic side we have noted that Rome held an inflated view of the creeds, postulating their divine origin and infallibility. Through a radical about-face the New Catholicism now consistently depreciates the relevance of the creeds by postulating their timebound character. Nineteenth-century Roman Catholic modernism precipitated recent developments by claiming that at no point in its history has the Church been in complete possession of the truth. The definition of dogma as a timelessly valid formula was challenged by George Tyrrell (1861-1909), the Dublin-born revisionist. Tyrrell was skeptical of the traditional Catholic belief that Christ and the apostles infallibly delivered the "deposit of faith" (sacraments, creeds and dogmas) to Peter's successors. Truth is not a corpus of concrete doctrines but a basic spiritual impulse that progressively unfolds in Christian experience and whose theological formulation requires constant modification. For Tyrrell, religion is a "life that unfolds itself, like an organism, from age to age, that exhibits an immense variety of species and genera in different times and places, in all of which, collectively, its potentiality is progressively disclosed."¹⁶ Hence the nineteen-hundred-year practice of ascribing to the creeds an eternal relevance is sheer "theologism" or "pseudo-science."

Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), the founder of Catholic modernism in France, mocks the traditional Church in his *Memoires* for July 8, 1883:

Are you simple enough to suppose that the Trinity of the Council of Nicaea is the Trinity of the Gospel and the early Fathers? . . . I know what men have produced your symbols. What use is it to tell me again you have received them from heaven?

¹³Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁴R. C. Miller, *This We Can Believe* (New York, 1976) 33.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 170, 171.

¹⁶In B. M. G. Reardon, *Roman Catholic Modernism* (London, 1970) 149.

Tradition has ossified into traditionalism, faith has been frozen to a formula. Loisy confessed that he did not accept any article of the Catholic Creed, save that Jesus had been "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

Ironically, the New Catholicism's depreciation of the creeds was reinforced by Vatican II's renewed emphasis on Scripture.¹⁷ Progressives at the Council succeeded in supplanting Rome's traditional two-source theory with the rule of the material sufficiency of the Bible alone. But in postulating Scripture as the ultimate referent, the New Catholicism adopted the critical interpretation of the Bible owned by radical Protestant scholarship. Hence when modern Catholic scholars conclude that critical science demands the reinterpretation of such doctrines as the nature of God, the atonement, or the resurrection, inevitably a chasm is created between the traditional creeds and the new consensus.

The New Catholicism argues that a distinction must be drawn between the substance of a theological truth and its formulation in any given era. As expressed by the Vatican II document, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,"¹⁸ "theologians are now being asked . . . to seek out more efficient ways . . . of presenting their teaching to modern man: for the deposit and the truths of faith are one thing, the manner of expressing them is quite another." The divine revelation, then, must be experienced and expressed in new ways appropriate to new times. The danger exists, however, that the core of truth in this insight may be seriously abused. In the final analysis, it appears that the New Catholicism really affirms that the old creedal formulae actually misrepresent the truth as it is understood today.¹⁹

Briefly we observe how this bifurcation between the timeless deposit and the timebound formula is reflected in contemporary Catholic theology. Karl Rahner differentiates between the "primordial utterance of revelation" and the Church's understanding of the gospel at any point in its history. Through the Church's shared experience of Christ, the eternal truth of God is more fully perceived and more authentically formulated. Thus revelation becomes progressively actualized through the Church's creative reflection on the gospel. Hence the ancient conciliar formulae about the Trinity or Christ are necessarily inadequate formulations of the truth. The modern theological task demands of the Church a willingness to reformulate new questions and raise new issues, where agreement with traditional doctrine cannot be guaranteed in advance.²⁰

Edward Schillebeeckx, the Flemish Dominican, stresses that every doctrinal assertion is relative to the milieu in which the formula arose. A statement that is true in one context may, indeed, prove untrue in another context. Since truth is progressively actualized through the ongoing historical process, it is "possible for

¹⁷See the "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," esp. chap. 6, in A. P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, 1975) 762-765.

¹⁸Par. 62, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 966.

¹⁹G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council* (Grand Rapids, 1965) 23: "The Pope's distinction between the truth and its formulation seemed to open the door to a new interpretation of church dogma."

²⁰K. Rahner, "Pluralism in Theology and the Unity of the Church's Profession of Faith," *Concilium* 46 (June 1969) 103 ff.

the articulation of a dogma to be discarded without any necessary denial of the dogma itself."²¹ It follows that the historically formulated creeds are in no wise binding on the Church for all times.

Hans Küng has crusaded to root out every temporal claim of infallibility—be it by Bible, Church or Pope. He describes the Church as “scholastic, legalistic, hierarchical, centralistic, sacramentalistic, traditionalistic, exclusive and often superstitious.”²² It follows that “everywhere . . . the magisterium, which in fact is represented by sinful and erring human beings, has erred.”²³ The Church is guilty of gross manipulation of the truth for imposing its creeds and dogmas as binding formularies. Concludes Küng:

Thus it is clear that ecumenical councils are not “inspired” by the Spirit but are only “assisted” by the Spirit. The definitions of ecumenical councils are not the Word of God; rather, as human statements they testify indirectly (with assistance from the Spirit) to the revelation of God.²⁴

The liberty that post-Vatican-II Catholicism has taken to modify the classical creeds is clearly highlighted in the 1966 Dutch New Catechism.²⁵ In this contemporary exposition of the faith serious aspersions are cast on the validity of the following traditional doctrines: the tri-unity of the Godhead, creation of the world *ex nihilo*, the existence of a moral law universally binding on mankind, the origin and propagation of sin from Adam, and Jesus' satisfaction for sins by his death on the cross.

In its broad theological outlook as well as in its disparagement of the creeds the New Catholicism betrays a marked convergence with radical Protestant thought that only a few years ago would have been thought inconceivable.

IV. WHY THE DEVOLUTION OF THE CREEDS?

At this point we want to draw together those factors that have led to radical depreciation of the creeds in the modern world. The first is the postulate of the subjective nature of truth. In the post-enlightenment world of Kant, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and the whole twentieth-century existentialist tradition, it is assumed that the reality of God cannot be objectively conceptualized. Truth has nothing to do with questioning the nature of God as he is in himself. Rather, truth is attained by exploring the intrinsic character of human existence. Thus Rahner insists that “the content of faith is not seen as a vast, almost incalculable number of propositions which, collectively and severally, are guaranteed by the formal authority of a God who reveals Himself.”²⁶ The gospel is “God's sole, to-

²¹E. Schillebeeckx, “The Problem of the Infallibility of the Church's Office,” *Concilium* 46 (June 1969) 92.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁴H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (Notre Dame, 1968) 53.

²⁵English translation: *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York, 1967).

²⁶K. Rahner, *Belief Today* (New York, 1967) 71.

tal, and fundamentally simple answer to the sole, total question which man asks of his own existence.”²⁷ J. A. T. Robinson stresses the subjective character of truth in these words: “The question of truth is always for the Christian, as Kierkegaard insisted, an existential one. His is not simply Pilate’s question, ‘What is Truth?’, but ‘What is my relation to the truth, what is true for me?’ ”²⁸ Concludes Robinson, “The ‘deposit’ of truth once delivered to the saints now sounds less like something laid down (like wine) than something washed up (like salt): the metaphor has subtly shifted.”²⁹

Clearly, devolution of the creeds is a logical consequence of the modern rejection of objective truth. One empathizes with Kierkegaard’s scorn of a cold and lifeless orthodoxy that fails to grip man in the depth of his being. But we reject the notion that the resurrection of the affective dimension of the truth must be preceded by the burial of its objective and cognitive character. Truth is more than modernism’s mystical assent to something about which one can know almost nothing.

A second factor that has precipitated the demise of the creeds is the contemporary stress on orthopraxis over against orthodoxy. Modern Catholic progressives such as Schillebeeckx, Dulles and Küng insist that what counts is not a Christian’s creed but his concrete deed. It is relatively simple to profess belief in the God of the Bible and yet fail to live Christianly in the world. Hence the ultimate datum is a life of discipleship rather than assent to any creedal formula. For Küng, maintenance of the truth is nothing less than following in the footsteps of Jesus. This kind of activist faith cannot be annulled, even by the wrong kinds of propositions.

Genuine concern for concrete demonstration of Christian faith in the world can only be applauded. But surely the only guarantee of a responsible Biblical orthopraxis is an authentic Biblical orthodoxy, such as faith has enshrined in the creeds. There can be no integrity of life apart from integrity of belief.

A third factor is the appeal to cultural relativism. Critics point to the vast cultural chasm that separates Bible and creed from the modern scientific outlook. The recent report of the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England states that “past beliefs and formulations” are “inevitably relative to the culture of the age which produced them.”³⁰ Charles Hartshorne speaks for the modern critical mind when he argues that the entire classical theological tradition is in bondage to a set of metaphysical concepts that are alien to the Christian message. Since the creeds thus reflect the bankruptcy of Greek patristic theology, it is necessary to “re-mythologize” its thought forms and imagery in terms meaningful to modern man.

But it is hardly responsible to argue that the use of fourth- or fifth-century concepts and language necessarily invalidates the message of the creeds. Undoubtedly the early Church selected from its reservoir of conceptual forms the most ade-

²⁷Ibid., p. 134.

²⁸J. A. T. Robinson, *The Difference in Being a Christian Today* (Philadelphia, 1972) 37.

²⁹Ibid., p. 38.

³⁰*Christian Believing* (London, 1976) 37.

quate "disclosure models" (Aldwinckle) by which to articulate its understanding of the gospel. That many older disclosure models speak to us today is confirmed by the fact that the great classics of literature, music and art communicate with power across temporal and cultural boundaries. The hallmark of a great art form is its timeless, universal appeal to humankind. One questions whether the conceptual and linguistic forms employed by modern Tillichians, Whiteheadians or Rahnerians are any more relevant and intelligible than those of the early Christian creeds. A good case can be made for the thesis that the modern process view of reality, for example, is less agreeable with the facts than the world view of Nicaea or Chalcedon.

Whereas the form of a given creed may be open to modernization, the content of bedrock Christian conviction preserved therein must be taken seriously. Contemporary neologists who abandon the creeds' content because of quarrels with their form seriously err.

As noted earlier, theories of development of dogma have seriously undermined confidence in the creeds. John Henry Newman in his "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine" (1845) postulated that dogma is not a fixed and unchangeable deposit but an organism that matures and evolves. The Anglican convert to Rome enunciated the principle of "dynamic identity," whereby the original seed of revelation could retain its identity through the long process of development. Newman thus concluded that no doctrinal formula from the past is adequate for the present. In every generation the gospel must be submitted to searching reformulation.

Karl Rahner, a student of Heidegger at Marburg, has been a vigorous proponent of the thesis that faith presents itself in ever-changing forms. Dogma necessarily evolves, since revelation is a continually unfolding reality in the Church. The Biblical writers witnessed the primordial revelation. Yet through revelatory dialogue with God the Church through the ages penetrates ever more deeply into the Christian mysteries. The magisterium's solemn proclamation of the Church's growing perception of the truth produces the formal development of dogma in history. Given the reality of doctrinal development, it follows that the ancient creeds must be superseded by more authentic representations of the divine reality.

The theory of dogmatic development rests on the false premise that special revelation is an ongoing reality in the Church. But God, in fact, has given a complete and infallible self-disclosure in Scripture and in Jesus of Nazareth. The Church's growth in knowledge through reflection and dialogue with history must be attributed to Holy Spirit illumination and human interpretation of general revelation rather than to fresh special revelation.

The thesis that dogma has retained its essential identity through the process of historical maturation is more a romantic supposition than a hard fact. One need only compare Pope Pius XII's "Syllabus or Summary of the Main Errors of our Age" (1864) with the doctrinal platform of Vatican II a century later to discover that the very "errors" proscribed by Pius have been promulgated by Vatican II. One is forced to the conclusion that the modern reinterpretation of the creed, in fact, empties the formula of its original meaning and turns it into its very opposite. Only a dreamy-eyed dialectician can live with the simultaneous affirmations and negations made by the developmental theorists.

V. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE CREEDS

Estimates of the creeds' worth have varied widely, from traditional Roman Catholic and Orthodox deification of the formulae to modernism's thorough rejection of their validity. In search of an authentic estimate of the creeds we are forced to reject both these extremes. More valuable is the older Protestant insight, that the classical creeds are a *norma normata* rather than a *norma normans*.

First, the creeds should not be regarded as a *norma normans*—"a rule that rules." We dissent from Catholic tradition, which postulates that the authority of the ancient creeds is absolute and infallible. The ecumenical councils were not organs of infallibility, and their formulae were not *logia* from God.

On the other hand, the creeds should be viewed as a *norma normata*—"a rule that is ruled." Note in the first place that the creed is a rule. If we desist from divinizing the creed, neither do we depreciate its intrinsic worth and relevance. We acknowledge that the creeds reflect the overwhelming faith-consciousness of the early Church. In the words of St. Vincent of Lerins, the creeds embody "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, and the Athanasian Creed affirm those core truths of the gospel embraced by the Church from the beginning. With Dornier we hold that the creeds constitute the precipitate of the religious consciousness of mighty men and times.

Whereas both Protestant and Roman Catholic neology claims that theology is all fluid and in state of flux, orthodoxy insists with James Orr that "the great landmarks of theology are already fixed."³¹ The early Church identified in its creedal formulae the salient features of the faith and left to later generations the task of filling in the theological contours. As formularies that record the central convictions of generations of early Christians, the creeds cannot be taken lightly. Hence theology dares not fly in the face of these sacred instruments. To do so would be to separate oneself from the continuum of historic Christianity.

As reliable instruments of the faith-consciousness of early Christianity, the classical creeds deserve to be more widely utilized by churches in the pietistic tradition, which tend to regard themselves as direct descendants of the apostles. In this way the more separatistic communions would gain a greater appreciation for the unity of Christ's Church in its historical continuum.

But the creed is not only a rule; it is also a rule that is ruled. As human formulations the creeds are subordinate to Scripture, the supreme rule of faith and practice. However majestic its language, however moving its assertions, however closely it purports to approximate apostolic doctrine, the creed is a human and therefore potentially fallible document. Ultimately the creeds must be checked and ruled by the Word of God. Christendom's creeds are worthy of honor to the degree that they accord with the teachings of the Word of God. As expressed in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566): "In matters of faith we cannot admit any other judge than God himself, who through His Word tells us what is true and what is false, what is to be followed, and what is to be avoided" (chap. 2). It follows that in matters of doctrinal controversy the ultimate court of appeal is inspired Scripture. In the process of appeal to the Bible the science of hermeneutics

³¹J. Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (New York, 1902) 32.

is obviously central to the decision process.

As the Church speaks to the modern world through its ancient documents, be they Scripture or creed, it is incumbent on her that she reformulate the timeless message in new and fresh ways. A faith that is living and relevant requires rearticulation in every generation. As Helmut Thielicke has put it, the gospel periodically must be redirected, for modern man is constantly changing his address. Herein lies the mandate for evangelical theology in the future: the creative reformulation and application of the historic Christian message in the contemporary secular world.