

The faith, that body of belief which identifies us as Christians and to which all orthodox believers are said to adhere, has for long centuries seemingly existed as the steady bedrock upon which the church has rested its thought and practice. Almost monolithic, it is understood to be an unbending and unchanging standard of what we must believe in order to call ourselves Christians. The writers of the New Testament speak of the faith as a body of belief “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The grammar of the phrase *the faith*, with its definite article, points to a defined entity, some bit of given information shared by the writers and readers of the New Testament Epistles. Yet even though the faith is certainly fixed and immutable, our apprehension and application of it are dynamic and ever-changing. Today we only know in part, but ultimately we will know in full, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:12. In another place Paul acknowledges that a oneness centered on the faith is a goal to be arrived at (Eph. 4:13) rather than a base to be set out from, a *terminus ad quem* as opposed to a *terminus a quo*. This admits some variation among believers concerning their understanding of what the faith is, and to this day that variation continues to exist.

As much as we would like the faith to be monolithic and as much as we tell ourselves and others that it is, the fact is “the faith” has suffered variation from era to era within the one church and from group to group within any one era. Throughout the centuries statements of faith have been issued that attempt to define and constrain what Christians believe, but the fact that such statements continue to be issued indicates that “the faith” is not exactly unbending and unchanging. Perhaps a “core” of tenets common to these multifarious declarations defines “the faith” by default and eliminates those elements that divide rather than unite. For example, Christ is central to Christian faith, and it would seem that belief that He is both fully God and fully man is a

necessary component thereof. Yet even on so central an issue as Christ, there is a range of variation off what most would call a norm, and much of that variation is either accepted or ignored. On the knottier issue of the Trinity, still greater variation exists, and, it seems, more latitude among those who call themselves (and others) Christians is exercised. There are major denominations that hold not to an eternal Trinity but to a temporal one, saying that the one God exists as the Father in creation, as the Son in redemption, and as the Spirit in the church age. Such variation is tolerated today in the Christian church to a far greater extent than in the first 1500 years of the church’s existence, when “the faith” was neatly defined and delimited by the creeds.

Today the creeds, while still accepted by many believers, have fallen into disrepute as standards of faith among major groups of believers. For these Christians the creeds are an unnecessary filter of biblical truth. Their argument has great merit: Attend to the Bible itself, not to statements about the Bible. Of course, those who use creeds as statements of faith will with reason respond that the creeds make clear how the Bible should be properly apprehended and that they act not as replacements for the Bible but as succinct and clear interpretations of it. Fortunately, however, few who take the creeds as their standard would label those who refuse to do so as heretical and anti-Christian, and few who reject the creeds would go so far as to say that those who embrace them are errant in the faith. Because of this, creeds do not appear to be a necessary el-

ement in defining what we as Christians are; subscription to the creeds is not required for membership in the Christian faith. Yet the creeds do appear to describe what Christians have traditionally held as “the faith.” It is uncanny how those who hold to the creeds and those who reject them basically believe in common and because of that commonality can all be called Christians.

“The Faith” & The Spirit

by Kerry S. Robichaux

The Creeds as Prescriptors of “The Faith”

Hence, the creeds have become at least statements of what Christians believe at a minimum, even though we may not want to afford them the status of statements of what Christians must believe in whole, of statements of the full contents of the faith. This amounts to a distinction between a descriptive and a prescriptive function for the creeds. As prescriptors, the creeds have tended to divide off, condemn, alienate, conquer, and finally eradicate non-standard elements within the church; as descriptors, however, the creeds well serve our need to know how the church has progressed in its journey toward the unity of the faith. As prescriptors, the creeds are held to be beyond reproach; as descriptors, however, the creeds bear scrutiny,

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analysis, and evaluation. When the creeds are allowed to prescribe, they determine “the faith”; when they are limited to their function to describe, they merely reflect it. There is no harm in the descriptive function of creeds, but when creeds are used to prescribe “the faith,” a killing stranglehold can be placed on the church as it attempts to arrive at the oneness of the faith.

It is particularly when the creeds are viewed as prescribing the full compass of the faith that we invite trouble for ourselves. It is true that historically the creeds were intended to prescribe doctrine in areas that were in dispute, but it is questionable whether they were meant to delimit the totality of doctrinal truth. Consider the language of the Nicene and the Athanasian formulae. The Nicene Creed begins with the declaration “We believe,” followed by the well-known series of affirmations concerning the Triune God and the person of Christ, and concludes with this anathema against Arianism:

And those who say, “There was time when He was not”; and, “Before He was begotten, He was not”; and, “He came into being out of nothing”; or maintain that the Son of God is of some other substance or being, or created, or changeable, or alterable—these the holy catholic and apostolic church anathematizes. [Author’s translation]

The collection of affirmations and the items of anathema merely prescribe what should be held and what should not be accepted by Christian faith. There is no indication that the totality of Christian faith is limited to the affirmations of the formula, and it would be unfair to the framers of the creed to assume that they intended such in their work.

The Athanasian Creed begins with much stronger language that ties the contents of the creed to eternal salvation: “Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith: which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly” (Schaff 66).

This preamble demonstrates how prescriptive in function the creeds had become. While the Nicene anathema had stated in negative terms what should not be understood concerning the person of Christ, the Athanasian preamble went further to require that Christians believe the creed’s particular declarations concerning the Trinity and the incarnate Son. Yet, even with such strikingly potent language, the Athanasian Creed nowhere asserts that the universal faith is limited to the affirmations and repudiations that it contains. Again, the setting of limits does not seem to be the intention of the creed’s framers.

Unfortunately, many modern believers take the creeds as delimiters of “the faith” and thus put them to a use that far exceeds their original design. And it appears that this tendency exists among those who fall on both sides of the creed issue. Many who accept the creeds are hesitant to go beyond what the creeds affirm, and many who reject the creeds do so because the creeds fall short of what they consider the full contents of the faith to be. Thus, it is because of what the creeds were not meant to do—prescribe limits to the faith—that the creeds engender problems among Christians of both persuasions.

The Creeds as Descriptors of “The Faith”

Regardless of the scope of their prescriptive role, a descriptive role can hardly be denied the creeds. What creeds affirm and what they do not affirm have the great historical value of indicating what the church has understood “the faith” to be across the centuries. This is how we wish to apply the creeds here. Since the creeds are a reflection of “the faith” as held at various points across the centuries, we can consult them to see what the church has emphasized as most critical in Christian truth and what the church has relegated to less important notice. When we examine the creeds, what is most emphatic is that “the faith” takes as its object a God who is triune. Christians are not uniquely believers in God, for Jews and Moslems at least are also believers in God. Nor are Christians uniquely believers in a Christ, for Jews also believe in the

Christ, even though they do not acknowledge the Christian identification of Jesus of Nazareth with the Messiah. The creeds characterize the Christian believer as one who uniquely holds that the one God, held and worshipped by Jew, Moslem, and Christian, is also in some real sense three, that God is triune. From the creeds we learn that historically Christians have been trinitarians. Modern unitarians would not have been recognized as Christian by those who in the first centuries of the church defended Christian faith. For all practical purposes, the defining truth of Christian faith was not only faith in Christ but also faith in God the Triune. As the creeds evolved, the sophistication in uttering the mystery of the Trinity, particularly in His immanent aspect, so increased that in the Athanasian Creed a formula came into being that utilized human expression to perhaps as full an extent as possible: The mystery could not be better uttered if attempts to utter it are to be made at all. So also in regard to the person of Christ, the creeds are emphatic and detailed. Particularly in the Symbol of Chalcedon, "the faith" requires acknowledgment of the truth of Christ as one person in two natures, which exist in Him unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably.

It is not coincidence that the creeds emphasize what the church employed to counter extremes in teachings that were being circulated at various crucial times. Kelly advises against the older scholarly position that "creeds expanded from brief affirmations to much longer, more elaborate ones solely under pressure of the desire to rebut or exclude heresy" (64). The caution against simplifying the complexities in the development of the creeds is warranted indeed, but we should not lose sight of the anti-heretical motivations that certainly existed. As Kelly points out, many of the creeds' individual affirmations, erstwhile understood as anti-heretical reflexes, existed in the early church long before they were employed against deviant teachings, but the specific emphases that any given creed possesses just as certainly indicate an anti-heretical bias. Without doubt, the creeds are triadic because they reflect and continue the declaratory function of the original baptismal formulae, which ultimately go back to Matthew 28:19-20. But the heightened details afforded the Son's person can only be accounted for in the context of the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. Even some of the individual affirmations of the creeds—for example, the *homoousion* and Christ's being one person in two natures—were not so much long-standing declarations as they were current juggernauts against heresy. Granted the long-standing nature of much of the material that finally made up the creeds, it is difficult to get beyond the observation that what the creeds emphasize is what the church felt most threatened about at the time of their composition. Unfortunately, the creeds often tended to emphasize certain items of Christian truth at the expense of others.

The Creeds and the Spirit

Where the creeds betray the greatest imbalance of emphasis is in regard to the Spirit, again because the Spirit, apart from the issue of His full deity, was never much the subject of controversy while the creeds were being developed. The simple statements of the creeds regarding the Spirit adequately affirmed the Spirit's deity and thus, as they stand, never begged for further development. Consider the stark statement of the Apostles' Creed, simply: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Hardly less could have been said for the trinity in God to be preserved, and that is probably the only reason for the statement at all. The Nicene Creed of AD 325 follows the Apostles' Creed exactly. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 offers

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more detail: "And [I believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets."

This more elaborate formulation concerning the Spirit reflects the new controversies that required answers. At Nicaea no teachings concerning the Spirit engendered debate, and thus nothing more than the simple affirmation of the Apostles' Creed was required. By the time of the Council of Constantinople, the Spirit had become an issue of some debate, and greater affirmations became necessary. Some four years before the council Basil of Caesarea had expressed the opinion that the formula from Nicaea was to some extent inadequate regarding the Spirit: "It is impossible for me to make even the slightest addition to the Nicene Creed, except the ascription of Glory to the Holy [Spirit], because our Fathers treated this point cursorily, no question having at that time arisen concerning the Spirit" (295). The improvements of 381 reflect a rebuttal of the Pneumatomachians, who denied the full deity of the Spirit, and yet these improvements fall short of defining the Spirit's deity in terms equal to those used to assert the deity of the Son. Particularly the notion that the Spirit is consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father had to be abandoned in the final form of the creed because a number of Pneumatomachian bishops threatened to leave

the council if such a notion were to be accepted. “The faith,” as it was understood in 381 at Constantinople, could affirm only as much as was finally adopted in the creed because there was no clear consensus on issues beyond.

What the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed does affirm concerning the Spirit is primarily matters of His identity and less matters of His function. At most, only the phrases *Giver of life* and *who spoke by the prophets* refer to what the Spirit does as opposed to what He is. However, even these phrases were employed more to define the deity of the Spirit than to describe the Spirit’s work on the believers. *Giver of life* served to affirm the Spirit’s deity in that, as Athanasius argued, He could not give life if He Himself had to be given life first in the same way that all living beings in God’s creation have to be given life (*Ad Serapion*, I:23). Whereas the epithet *Lord* identified the Spirit with Yahweh of the Old Testament, *Giver of life* identified Him as God by an essential function of God. The phrase *who spoke by the prophets* tied the faith of the New Testament with that of the Old Testament and implicitly rejected the old Marcionite view that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the Lord Jesus Christ. By such a declaration, the Spirit was held to be the one God who once inspired the Old Testament prophets and now spoke in the New Testament believers.

The Athanasian Creed is also interested in the Spirit in only a limited way. The longer first section of the creed concerns itself with catholic faith in “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity” (Schaff 66). References to the Spirit here, like the parallel references to the Father and the Son, affirm the Spirit’s personhood, glory and majesty, uncreated existence, incomprehensibility, eternity, omnipotence, lordship, and Godhead equal to that of the Father and the Son. Further, the Spirit is characterized as “neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding,” echoing the language of John 15:26 and distinguishing Him from the Son, who is said to be begotten of the Father. The second section of the creed is devoted to statements regarding “the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Essentially, the Athanasian Creed affirmed the established truths concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ, as they had been forged in the fourth and fifth centuries, and like the earlier creeds offered little definition on the Spirit.

The limited attention to the Spirit in the creeds reflects not only the limited controversy concerning the Spirit in the church of the fourth and fifth centuries but also the limited and diverse understanding held by the church’s teachers at that time. Even among those whom we now consider orthodox, a great deal of confusion existed regarding the Spirit. Gregory Nazianzen gives this account:

But of the wise men amongst ourselves, some have conceived of him [the Holy Spirit] as an Activity, some as a

Creature, some as God; and some have been uncertain which to call Him, out of reverence for Scripture, they say, as though it did not make the matter clear either way. And therefore they neither worship Him nor treat Him with dishonour, but take up a neutral position, or rather a very miserable one, with respect to Him. And of those who consider Him to be God, some are orthodox in mind only, while others venture to be so with the lips also. (319)

While the intense controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries impelled the church toward finer and finer articulations of the mysteries of the Trinity and Christology, a relative quiet concerning the particular merits of the Spirit prevailed, and a comparable precision and depth of understanding concerning the third of the Trinity never took shape, at least insofar as it was to be communicated to the ages through the creeds. Sadly—and this is the chief point here—from the creeds that issued from the fourth and fifth centuries, from those records of “the faith” as it was held then, we can affirm that the Spirit is God, but very little else. Later theology would grapple with the implications of the creeds’ trinitarian and christological statements, and a millennium and a half later the church would still be developing its notions on these two major tenets, but because of the relatively stark presentation of the Spirit in the creeds, it seems that the later church was little motivated to develop a theology that afforded the Spirit a role greater than that of an also-ran. We may excuse ourselves and take solace in the words of Gregory Nazianzen, who too noticed the embarrassing lack of attention paid to the Spirit up to his time and tried to give reason for it:

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of Himself. (326)

But if the Spirit’s indwelling has indeed granted us “a clearer demonstration of Himself,” why was the early church so much at a loss for words to describe Him, and why has the church since then so greatly neglected Him in both its theology and its life? Can it really be that the Spirit has been so well-known to us that articulation concerning Him can be taken for granted?

The creeds exhibit a great imbalance of emphasis when placed alongside the faith of the New Testament that they attempt to define. As descriptors of “the faith,” they are most at odds with the New Testament in relation to the Spirit, for the New Testament, particularly its Epistles, is just as much a book about the Spirit as it is about the Son. It has been noted that the New Testament breaks into three sections, each with a different emphasis on the economical Trinity. The first section, the four Gospels, emphasizes the Son with the

Father by the Spirit; this is the incarnation of the Triune God. The second section, Acts through Jude, emphasizes the Spirit as the Son with the Father; this is the consummation of the Triune God. The third section, Revelation, emphasizes the seven Spirits, who are out from the Eternal One and of the Redeemer; this is the intensification of the Triune God (Lee 11-20). This characterization of the New Testament respects both the wholeness of the Trinity in His move and the role of the Spirit in applying the single economy and action of the Triune God. The creeds, on the other hand, focus more on the immanent existence of the Trinity and on the Son as we see Him in the Gospels. Unfortunately, even the creeds' description of the Son as God incarnate can easily be read tritheistically. Unless we see the Son as coming with the Father by the Spirit to be a man, we fall short of a proper understanding of both the Trinity and Christology. And further, unless we see the emphasis of the greater portion of the New Testament, in which we see the Spirit realizing the Son with the Father, we fall short of understanding what our own role and participation in the economy of God is. Our faith should be our living, not merely a creed we recite, even enthusiastically, on days of great import. But by design, what we believe can become what we live only by the Spirit, for the Spirit is the realization of the Triune God and the person of Christ. The creeds are certainly trinitarian, and they are certainly christological, but they are anything but pneumatological, and this is their greatest defect.

The long history of the church finds us at the unusual point of having theology without the Spirit to vivify and instantiate it, whereas remarkably our beginning as a community of faith was one of experience of the Spirit without the sophistication of theology to embody and articulate it. The creeds have helped to embody and articulate what we as Christians believe, but they have all but neglected completely the Spirit, the Divine Person whose function it is to make us what we essentially are, persons of living faith. What is needed is a theology of the Spirit that extends the proper theology of the Trinity and Christology that has long existed. We are not recommending a theology that appends to itself a battery of experiences of the Holy Spirit; Pentecostalism has for some time attempted such, with questionable results. Nor can we accept a theology that notices merely that the Spirit exists but little else. What we are recommending

is a theology that respects the function of the Spirit in His essential and economical existence within the Trinity, in relation to the person of Christ, and in the application of the Triune God in the salvation of His elect. As to His existence within the Trinity, we must see that there is no Trinity without the Spirit; there is no Father and there is no Son without the Spirit. We believe in an eternal three, not in an eternal two and an enigmatic third. We recognize that what makes the Father the Father and the Son the Son is very much the Spirit,

call Him the hypostatic Love that exists between Father and Son or the one Divine Essence that is possessed and communicated by Father and Son. Further, there is no incarnate Christ without the Spirit. His conception as a human being was of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20), His actions as a man were by the Spirit (Matt. 12:28), and even His death on the cross was through the Spirit (Heb. 9:14). In resurrection Christ comes to us as the Spirit, and it is the Spirit who applies all that God in Christ is. Christian salvation is so much more than the imputation of Christ as our righteousness; it is the application of the Triune God, embodied in the all-inclusive Christ, who is realized as the life-giving Spirit. Salvation is not merely by God but is God, and the God who is our salvation is the Spirit. We submit that theology true to the New Testament and true to the genuine faith regards the Spirit as integral to the Trinity, to the person of Christ, and to the full salvation of God's elect. AFC

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