

Introduction

Forms and Functions of the Ancient Creeds

According to an ancient legend, as the apostles were about to split and go their separate ways, they felt the need to agree on the contents of the message they would preach. The occasion is said to have been the origin of the “Apostles’ Creed.” One version of the story recalls the scene in John 20:29. It tells how each of the Twelve, inflamed with the Holy Spirit, made a personal contribution to the profession of faith:

Peter said, “I believe in God the Father almighty...maker of heaven and earth”...Andrew said “and in Jesus Christ His Son...our only Lord”...James said “Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit...born from the Virgin Mary”...John said “suffered under Pontius Pilate...was crucified, dead and buried”...Thomas said “descended into hell...on the third day rose again from the dead”...James said “ascended into heaven...sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty”...Philip said “thence He will come to judge the living and the dead”...Bartholomew said “I believe in the Holy Spirit”...Matthew said “the holy Catholic Church...the communion of saints”...Simon said “the remission of sins”...Thaddaeus said “the resurrection of the flesh”...Matthias said “eternal life.”¹

Even though the story had all the marks of pious fiction, it won widespread acceptance in medieval Europe. But only in the Latin church. Greek Christians, for example, knew nothing of a creed attrib-

uted to the apostles. By the fifteenth century, historians and theologians everywhere had begun to doubt that the apostles were the authors of any creed. Scholars could find no evidence in the New Testament that there existed a *fixed* list of doctrines in the first century. Nonetheless the legend continued to influence the popular imagination and mislead the faithful and theologians alike as to the true nature and function of the creed.

Despite its questionable parentage, the legend captured certain insights that medieval preachers and catechists found useful. The Roman liturgies pray “for all who hold and teach the catholic faith that comes to us from the apostles” (Eucharistic Prayer I). Faith is mediated by the community that traces its origins to the preaching of the apostles. Another form of the creed—the Ecumenical Creed promulgated by the Council of Constantinople in 381 and used in the Sunday liturgy—confesses belief in ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH. We share the faith of the first Christian community, and in that sense our faith is that of the apostles. By attributing its contents to the Twelve acting under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the legend clearly implies that wherever Christians recite the “Apostles’ Creed,” they profess the same faith as that of the ancient church.

Before the Twelve thought of themselves as “apostles”—people with a mission—they were witnesses. They were observers and participants in important events of Jesus’ public life, notably the circumstances of his trial and execution. They heard him expound the Scriptures in the Temple precincts, they listened when he denounced the Pharisees and when he spoke of the reign of God. These firsthand experiences took on new meaning after Easter. Blessed with hindsight—not to mention being overpowered by the Spirit—the apostles began to see Jesus of Nazareth in a new light.

FROM KERYGMA TO CREED

186-187 On the first Pentecost, Peter “with the Eleven” was driven by an inner compulsion to proclaim what they had seen and heard and, yes, felt. The proclamation—in Greek, *kerygma*—was in fact a profession of faith. Peter definitively outlined the beliefs that were to become the fundamentals of Christianity: “the day of the Lord” foretold by the prophets is at hand; it has been ushered in by Jesus of Nazareth, a man sent by God; his credentials were his words and works. This Jesus, “by the set

plan of God,” was crucified and killed by the pagans, but death could not hold him. He fulfilled the vision of King David, who had predicted the resurrection of the Messiah. Peter continued:

Therefore let the whole house of Israel know beyond any doubt that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:36)

If one seeks a brief statement of what the apostles believed, it must be looked for in the *kerygma*. The “good news of salvation”—the gospel—was proclaimed again and again, and always it stressed the same general points: Jesus of Nazareth, of the lineage of David, had come as Son of God and Messiah; he announced the advent of the kingdom; he was crucified, died, and was buried; on the third day he rose again and was exalted to the right hand of God; he will come again to judge the living and the dead. Those who respond to the gospel, repent, and are baptized will receive the forgiveness of their sins and share in the life of the resurrection. Even St. Paul, who got the story secondhand, followed the same outline in much of his preaching. One finds in his letters (as we shall see) many words and phrases that are echoed in the creed.

The kerygma formed the nucleus of a christological confession that is summarized in the slogan, “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:30). Brief formulas of this kind appear side by side with fuller and more detailed doctrinal formulas that echo the preaching of the apostles. The best-known example is the passage at the end of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians:

I handed on to you first of all what I myself received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.... (1 Cor 15:3–4)

By the time of St. Justin (c. A.D. 160), stock formulas seem to have come into use. The variations are many, but the basic confession is the same:

We find it proclaimed beforehand in the books of the prophets
that Jesus our Christ would come to earth,
be born through the Virgin and be made man...
would be crucified and die,
and be raised again,
and ascend into heaven.²

THE CREED AS PROFESSION OF FAITH

Justin witnesses not only to the beliefs held in the church of Rome in the mid-second century. He also describes in some detail the sacramental rites, and it is in connection with the rite of baptism that he writes:

...Those who are convinced and believe what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated. In the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost, they receive the washing with water.... There is invoked over the one who wishes to be regenerated, and who is repentant of his sins, the name of God, the Father and Lord of all.... This washing is called illumination, since they who learn these things become illuminated intellectually. Furthermore, the illuminated one is also baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who predicted through the Prophets everything concerning Jesus.³

Plainly the church at Rome continued to obey Jesus' instruction, "make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

Although several of the phrases, including the reference to Pontius Pilate, appear in the credal formulas, it does not seem that the creed had as yet taken on a fixed form in Justin's time. The person being baptized, however, was asked standard questions to which he or she responded, "I believe." An example of this early "interrogatory" form of the creed is found in the writings of another Roman author, St. Hippolytus. Shortly after 200, Hippolytus, a rival of Pope Calixtus for leadership of the Roman church, compiled a sacramentary known in history as the *Apostolic Tradition*. In describing liturgical practice in the Eternal City at the beginning of the third century, Hippolytus gives a detailed account of the catechumenate and the rite of baptism. The profession of faith made by the candidate for baptism followed the interrogatory form:

And [when] he [who is to be baptized] goes down into the water, let him who baptizes lay hands on him saying thus:

Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?
And he who is to be baptized shall say:
I believe.
Let him forthwith baptize him at once, having his hand laid upon
his head. And after this let him say:
Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate,
And died,
And rose the third day living from the dead,
And ascended into the heavens,
And sat down at the right hand of the Father,
And will come to judge the living and the dead?
And when he says: I believe, let him baptize him the second time
and again let him say:
Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church,
And the resurrection of the flesh?
And he who is being baptized shall say: I believe. And so let him
baptize him the third time.^{4*}

By the fourth century a “declaratory” form of the creed similar to the one we use today was in common use. Declaratory creeds are framed as statements that use the first person: “I believe,” or “We believe.” They are short declarations that recapitulate Christian beliefs.

THE CREED AS SYMBOL

The transition from the interrogatory form to the declarative form of the creed was gradual. We have fragments of declaratory creeds that go back to the second century, but by the fourth century this form was in use everywhere. Although they later found their way into the liturgical celebration of baptism and Eucharist, the declaratory creeds seem to have developed originally for catechetical use.

J.N.D. Kelly says declaratory creeds are “a by-product of the Church’s fully developed catechetical system.”⁵ The original function of the creed in its interrogatory form, integral to the rite of baptism itself, was a confession of personal faith. The declaratory creed came to have a signifi-

*The reform of the Order of Christian Initiation after Vatican II restored the interrogatory form of the creed to the baptismal rite. The change was made to emphasize the creed as a personal confession of faith.

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cant ceremonial place in the catechesis preparatory to baptism. It served as a convenient statement that summarized the trinitarian doctrine that had been implicit, and perhaps only hinted at, during the time of the catechuminate. The traditional word for a summary statement of this kind was *symbolum* (Greek, *symbolon*). Thus in Latin the Apostles' Creed is known to this day as the *Symbolum Apostolicum*, and the Ecumenical Creed of 381 as the *Symbolum Constantinopolitanum*. In Lent, as the day of baptism approached, the bishop "handed over" the creed (the *traditio symboli*) and proceeded to explain it phrase by phrase. The catechumens in turn were expected to learn it by heart so as to be able to "give it back" (the *redditio symboli*); that is, they were asked to recite it publicly to demonstrate that they were sufficiently grounded in the faith to be baptized.

One of the earliest authors to write a commentary on the creed, Rufinus of Aquileia (d. 410), explains that it is referred to as a *symbolum* because it is like the passwords (*symbola distincta*) that military commanders gave to their troops so that the soldiers could identify themselves to one another and be distinguished from the enemy. The creed was thought of as a symbol of faith whereby Christians identified themselves to one another. There are many variations of this explanation in the writings of the church fathers, most linking the symbol to the trinitarian mystery confessed in the creed. Beginning with the interrogatory creeds and continuing later with declarations such as the *Symbolum Apostolicum* and the *Symbolum Constantinopolitanum*, the baptismal creeds do not simply confess faith in the Triune God; they are symbols of the shared belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit that identify members of the church to one another.⁶

THE CREED AS NARRATIVE

In the context of catechetical instruction the declaratory form of the creed simply tells a story of creation and salvation. In terms of literary form it is a narrative much like the *shema* of ancient Israel. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4) became Judaism's classic confession of faith. It is called *shema* from the opening word, "hear." The *shema* remains the customary call to prayer among orthodox Jews. It is a reminder to Israel of the favor Yahweh bestowed on his people. Though it took on a fixed form rather late in the history of Judaism, the *shema* expresses the radical monotheism that gave the

ancient Israelites their sense of identity as a people. Echoing that other popular Israelite acclamation, “The Lord is God; there is no other besides him” (Deut 4:35), it enshrines a communal conviction not as a timeless truth but as an affirmation of a particular relationship of the people of Israel to the God who is unique, the one and only Lord of the universe.⁷

A number of formulations in the Old Testament have the ring of declaratory creeds. Like the baptismal declarations of the Christians who are to come after, the early Israelite creeds are professions of faith ritualized in a liturgical setting. They tell the story of God’s involvement in the events of Israel’s history. One such summary—called by the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad a “cultic credo”—is found in the book of Deuteronomy. It is a classic example of a narrative interpretation of historical events that takes on a credal function in the community created by those events:

...you shall declare before the Lord, your God, “My Father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey....” (26:5–9)

From the account in Deuteronomy and parallel texts, it seems that formulas similar to this were recited by the Israelites when they brought the first fruits of the harvest as an offering to Yahweh at one of the hallowed shrines.

Another example of a cultic credo is found in Joshua 24:2–13. Associated with the renewal of the covenant at Shechem, it narrates Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan under the leadership of Moses’ successor, Joshua. “If the setting described there,” writes Bernhard Lang, “is more than a literary fiction we must think in terms of a regular service involving a profession of faith.”⁸ The ritual not only reaffirmed Israel’s commitment to the covenant; it was also the way in which new clans or tribes became members of the Israelite confederation. As tribes recited the narrative of Yahweh’s involvement with the people of Israel,

they professed their faith and appropriated for themselves Israel's traditions and beliefs. The rite consisted of two parts: 1) a priest or prophet recounted the history of Yahweh's dealings with his people from Abraham on and asked those present to commit themselves to this God; and 2) the tribes then responded (see Jos 24:16–17).

Other confessional statements that tell the saga of Israelite history are found in the Psalms (e.g., 44:1–8; 78; 105; 106). These texts further illustrate the way in which, on important occasions, Israelites recalled past events and interpreted them according to a set pattern. They are synopses of the complex Israelite epic told in the Deuteronomic account that runs from Genesis through 2 Kings, and are repeated and carried forward to post-exilic times by the author-editors of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. As expressions of Israel's faith, these narratives were foundational to the renewal of the covenant between God and his people.

Similarly the baptismal creed, especially in its declaratory form, narrates the saving events that are the basis for the faith of the Christian community. The three parts of the Christian story tell of God's action in creation, in Jesus of Nazareth, and in the Spirit who continues to work in the life and history of the church. As with most stories, it has a beginning, middle, and end. The narrative function of the creed is most evident in the second, which tells of Jesus' heavenly origins, his birth, life, death, and resurrection. It recapitulates the main points of the kerygma and makes it clear that everything else is interpreted in the light of the events that climaxed his early career.

THE CREED AS DOXOLOGY

The creed, like the *shema*, serves both as a chant of praise (in Greek, *doxa*) and as a witness of faith. Christians confess before their Maker and their fellow human beings the wonders God has done for them. Although there are important differences between creeds and hymns, the two genres have much in common.⁹ The creed functions in the liturgy as a hymn of praise, just as many of the Hebrew psalms praising the glorious deeds of Yahweh are also creedal statements. In the words of St. Paul, we confess with our lips what we believe in our hearts (Rom 10:8–10; 2 Cor 4:13). Thus the public recitation of the creed in the eucharistic liturgy is both communal praise and testimony.

The prayer of the liturgy also became a personal acclamation of praise. St. Augustine urges that Christians recite it frequently. "Say the

creed daily. When you rise, when you compose yourself to sleep, repeat your creed, render it to the Lord, remind yourself of it, be not irked to say it over.”¹⁰ “Render it to the Lord” suggests that the creed is a prayer. “Remind yourself of it” suggests that the creed is a personal statement of beliefs and signals acceptance of traditional Christian doctrines. Repetition reaffirms one’s commitment to the pattern of life and purpose that one acquires from incorporation into Christ in baptism and from being a member of the Christian community.¹¹ The creed is a constant reminder of that baptism which St. Justin, in the manner of the ancient church, calls “illumination.” It defines us in a new particular relationship to God and to the world. In summary form the creed discloses that God at once transcends the universe and at the same time enters into history and the lives of human beings. Like all good stories, which are in essence pointed narratives, it has the power to change patterns of thought and meaning so that everything is seen in a new light.

THE CREED AS RULE OF FAITH

The fourth century marks a further transition in the history and function of the creed. The creed that began as corporate and personal expression of faith is made to serve as a test of orthodoxy, a *regula fidei*—“rule of faith.”

By the year 200, writers had already begun to speak of a “rule of faith.” For the ancients the rule of faith summed up the essence of the Christian message, and served as proof of orthodoxy as well as a safeguard against false and heretical teachings. All agreed that it was the “apostolically authorized deposit of doctrine which had been handed down in the church from the beginning.”¹² There is some variation in the wording from author to author, but the substance is generally the same. When forced to list specific beliefs, early writers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian cited practices and customs observed in the church from apostolic times and fell back on formulas that echoed the baptismal creeds. There seemed to have been a general acknowledgment that the trinitarian creed, however brief, contained the essentials of Christian faith.

To moderns, who find most rules oppressive, a “rule of faith” seems like thought control. The early Christians, however, saw it in a positive light. They wanted guidelines to ensure that the teaching being passed on to them was the authentic teaching of Christ. St. Paul was careful to hand on what he had received (1 Cor 15:3), and the author of the pas-

toral epistles repeatedly hammered at the importance of sound doctrine (1 Tim 4:6; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:13–14). According to St. Irenaeus, it is a prime responsibility of bishops, successors of the apostles, to safeguard the unity of the church and the authenticity of the gospel message by seeing to it that teaching conforms to the rule of faith. Later the *regula fidei* becomes the norm for interpreting Scripture and for discerning which traditions to maintain.

Whatever the relationship of the creed to the rule of faith in the second and third centuries, in the fourth century the creed itself becomes a rule of faith, a criterion of orthodoxy. In order to emphasize a particular doctrine or to confront a questionable teaching, Christian communities inserted clauses and qualifiers into the creed to make its meaning more precise. As will be seen in the commentary on the individual articles that follows, terms were added to the creed to combat certain errors and misleading interpretations. When one church found an appropriate phrase, often other churches picked it up. These clarifications were made without fanfare at the local level. It was a different matter, however, at the Council of Nicea in 325 when the bishops inserted the *homoousion* clause, stating that the Son is “one in being with the Father.” They needed a formula to condemn the Arian doctrine that made the Son less than the Father. Arius, an influential theologian in the church at Alexandria, had been able to twist the biblical texts to his own purposes. Simple and direct, the narrative form of the baptismal creed about the work of the Trinity in the world was not subtle enough for the kind of issues raised by Arianism. Thus in an effort to state the church’s faith more precisely regarding the relationship of the Father and Son, Nicea made some additions. Later the Council of Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Nicene expressions and added others in clarifying the relationship of the Spirit to the other persons of the Trinity.

These insertions, made after much soul searching by the bishops, marked a dramatic change in the function of the creed. Unlike the earlier additions made by local churches for particular purposes, those made at Nicea and Constantinople became normative for the universal church because they were mandated by ecumenical councils. As C.H. Turner put it, “The old creeds were creeds for catechumens, the new creed was a creed for bishops.”¹³

In the sixth century the creed came to be recited in the eucharistic liturgy. In the East, bishops with monophysite leanings, afraid that the efforts of the Council of Chalcedon to affirm the integrity of Jesus’

humanity would be misunderstood by the faithful, introduced the creed of Constantinople into the Eucharist to exalt the divinity of Christ.¹⁴ For reasons that will be explained below, the practice of reciting the creed in the Latin Mass began in Spain. Charlemagne extended the practice through the Frankish empire at the end of the eighth century as a defense against adoptionism (a form of the Arian heresy), but it was another two centuries before the practice was introduced in Rome, and then only to placate the emperor, Henry II (1002–1024).

Nicea set a precedent. Subsequent councils and synods sought to safeguard traditional doctrine and to repudiate erroneous teachings by formulating creedal statements designed to resolve differences of opinion by finding language that a majority of bishops, if not all, could agree on. In efforts to settle the trinitarian controversy, dozens of creeds were drafted in the years immediately following Nicea before the creed of Constantinople won acceptance. As we shall see below, the Council of Chalcedon (451) appended its own creedal statement to that of Constantinople. The creed of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) is a summary statement of the theology of medieval Catholicism. The Second Council of Lyons (1274) drafted a profession of faith designed to re-establish communion between the Greek and Latin churches. Later Protestants drew up creedal statements to settle differences among themselves and establish their own identity vis-à-vis the church of Rome.¹⁵ Creeds of this lineage are basically theological statements, and differ greatly in purpose, structure, and tone from the primitive baptismal creeds.

In an effort to bring the central purpose of the creed to the fore, that is, to highlight its dual function as a profession of faith and doxology, this book, like the creed, is structured in three parts. It will become evident that although we distinguish three articles of the creed—Father, creator; Son, redeemer, and Spirit, sanctifier—we cannot isolate them from one another any more than we can separate the works of the three persons in the Godhead. We attribute particular activities in the world to the Father, Son, and Spirit; but as we hope to make clear in the pages that follow, it is always the one God who creates, saves, and makes holy.

ARTICLES OF FAITH

In recounting the old legend that told how the apostles, in order to insure uniformity in preaching and teaching, compiled a creed, we

granted that the story, while weak on history, contained elements of truth and insights of lasting value. But it also has a negative side. The late Henri de Lubac, S.J., complained that the legend imposed an artificial structure on the creed and thereby obscured its trinitarian pattern and distorted its function.¹⁶

190-191 The Apostles' Creed came to have more a pedagogical than a liturgical function. It served as a kind of syllabus for preachers and teachers, a catalog of divine truths to be explained, interpreted, and applied from pulpit and podium. Because tradition named twelve apostles, authors were bent on identifying twelve articles of faith, but they did not always agree on how the text was to be divided. One modern author singles out twenty clauses in the Apostles' Creed, each of which can be considered an article of faith.¹⁷ It is not, however, a new question. Medieval theologians, led by their desire to systematize theology, grouped the articles in various ways. St. Thomas Aquinas answers the question "whether the articles of faith are suitably enumerated" by distinguishing fourteen articles—seven pertaining to the majesty of the Godhead and seven to Christ's human nature. He acknowledges, however, that some authors distinguish twelve articles, six pertaining to the Godhead and six to Christ's humanity. In his famous catechetical instruction on the creed, Aquinas follows still another division.¹⁸ St. Bonaventure was another who divided the articles into two sets of seven.¹⁹

On the eve of the Reformation, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote a catechism that was in fact a commentary on the Apostles' Creed. Although he held that the "major divisions" of the creed are three, arising from faith in the one God who is Father, Son, Spirit, he acknowledges "some more recent interpreters have thirteen articles instead of twelve" and some have fourteen.²⁰ Martin Luther emphasized the trinitarian theme of the creed in structuring his catechism on the three articles—belief in the Father, belief in the Son, and belief in the Spirit. The Catechism of the Council of Trent acknowledged that

the Creed is divided into three principal parts: the first describes the first Person of the divine nature and the wonderful work of creation; the second professes the second Person and the mystery of man's redemption; and the third comprises in appropriate short sentences the doctrine of the third Person, who is the origin and source of our sanctification.²¹

In its explanation of the creed, however, Trent's catechism divides the text into twelve articles. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, authorized by Pope John Paul II, quotes the above passage and, like the Tridentine catechism, follows the traditional twelvefold division.

Medieval theologians emphasized the notion that the propositions are "articles" of faith. In Latin *articulus* is the word for "joint." The image invokes a comparison with the skeletal structure of the human body. Just as the vertebrae of the spine are both divided and bonded by joints, so the creed articulates what Christians believe, focusing on particulars while at the same time expressing their organic unity. The fragmentation of the creed into short clauses risks losing sight of how the individual clauses relate to each other and to the whole. When individual articles are studied apart from the story of creation and salvation, the mystery of the Trinity, God acting in human history, is obscured. As artificial as the scholastic division of the creed into two parts was, it did come closer to capturing the theological significance of the creed than the division into twelve articles. The primitive form of the creed, indeed its basic structure, rooted in the baptismal rites, keeps the attention of individuals and the community focused on the Trinity and the incarnation.

INTERPRETING THE CREED

Confronted with the allegation that the ancient creeds are no longer intelligible to the modern believer, churches and theologians have responded in two ways. Many have attempted to compose new summaries of the Christian faith. As will be evident in examples cited in the closing chapter of this book, these attempts seek not only to find language "relevant" to the modern believer, but also to emphasize other beliefs that are part of the Christian heritage.

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The second way of responding to the challenge of obsolescence is to restore meaning and relevance to the classic creeds by interpreting them in the light of today's questions. The continuous flow of commentaries from patristic times to the present indicates that the church has recognized the need to explicate the creed for each new audience. It is not a question of inventing new teachings, but of recovering old traditions and presenting them in a new context.

The Christian creed stands like a giant arch spanning the centuries. One foot is planted deep in history, and the other is grounded firmly in

present praxis. In order to appreciate why the creed has withstood the storms of controversy and the erosion of time it is necessary to examine both footings.

By situating the text of the creed in a historical context, we gain insight into why certain beliefs were given prominence. Emphasis on the phrases “only begotten” and “born of the Virgin Mary,” for example, becomes clear in light of the anti-gnostic stance that the church took in the second century. Although the original intent of such affirmations as “light from light, true God from true God” is initially intelligible only in the context of the subordinationist controversies of the fourth century, Christians today who stand beneath the arch and look at these same beliefs from the vantage point of history must ask what they mean. A doctrine as apparently marginal as Christ’s descent into hell (or as we now say, “among the dead”) has taken on new significance. Although the reason it was inserted in the creed in the first place is not at all clear, contemporary theologians suggest that it is a symbol of God’s intention to save all peoples.

Just as Christians of the future will be in a better position to appreciate the significance of developments and controversies of our time, in many ways Christians of the twenty-first century will have a better understanding of the dynamics that operated in the ancient church than the Christians of that time did. Sometimes people are too close to a situation to understand it; distance often provides a better perspective. The generation that was active as participants and spectators in the Second Vatican Council gained new insights to the interpretation of the ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries. The specific issues were different, but the overriding concern to safeguard the apostolic faith was the same. Although we still await a final assessment of the achievements of Vatican II, it now has a permanent place in the history of the church, along with Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and other great councils.

All of this is to say that in looking at the ancient creed in light of today’s theology, this commentary also views today’s theology in light of the Ecumenical and Apostles’ Creeds. The comments on the creed in the next chapter begin with a few reflections on the problem of religious language; they end in the last chapter with some further remarks on the quest for a common profession of faith.

FURTHER READINGS

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