

Editorial

THE confession of the faith, involving, as "confessionalism", the formulation of the essentials of Christian belief, has always been an integral part of the Church's self-expression. Historically, the necessity for confessionalism has been most apparent when the threat of false teaching has obliged the Church to define the truth, or certain doctrines of the truth, in such a way as to expose and counteract prevalent errors.

The germ of confessionalism is, indeed, present in the New Testament. Thus, for example, Paul is counteracting the dangerous error of those persons in Corinth who denied the reality of the resurrection when he writes: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, etc. . . ." (1 Cor. 15: 3ff, RSV); and John is meeting the menace of Docetism, which denied the reality of the incarnation of Christ, when he says: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already" (1 Jn. 4: 2f., RSV). In similar vein Jude exhorts his readers to "contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3, RSV). These examples show how the appearance of false doctrine evokes, necessarily, a confessional act from the Christian community in witness to the true faith.

In the early Church the three classical instances of confessionalism are provided by the ecumenical creeds. The earliest of these, the Apostles' Creed, may be described as skeletal because of the economy of its expression: it is a statement of the main facts of redemptive faith and history, the confessional thrust of which is seen in its unambiguous affirmation of the reality of the incarnation, suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, in implicit opposition to false teaching which was current in the post-apostolic period.

The so-called Nicene Creed, which belongs to the fourth century, is a fuller document, particularly in respect of the doctrine of the person of Christ. Its definition of the eternal consubstantiality of the Son with the Father is the rejoinder of the fourth-century Church to the heresy of Arianism, which honoured Christ as only the first of creatures who had once not existed. The latest and the fullest of the three is what is known as the Athanasian Creed, the main contribution of which is a careful definition of the trinitarian doctrine of the Church and further explanation of the nature of Christ's incarnate person, in refutation of certain later heresies.

These three credal statements were standards of orthodoxy around which those who claimed to be genuine Christians were expected to rally. The confessional formulary, then, may be said to fulfil a three-

fold function : firstly, as a positive affirmation of Christian truth ; secondly, as an antidote to false teaching ; and, thirdly, as an integrating focus for church membership, conducive to intelligent and coherent churchmanship.

The attempt to restrict the use of the term "confessionalism" (generally with pejorative undertones) to the doctrinal manifestoes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is misguided ; for the great confessional statements of faith which sprang from the Reformation are historically in series with the creeds of the early Church. Indeed, they serve to complement them, or to supply certain deficiencies in their structure. Reasonably enough, in view of the heresies prevalent at the time, the preoccupation of the creeds is with definitions concerning the person of Christ and the proper understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity (ontology). Such definitions, of course, have an essential connection with the doctrine of salvation, and their formulation was vital if the very foundations of God's work in Christ were not to be swept away by erroneous teaching. Yet (as the times did not seem to demand it) they were deficient in their delineation of the nature of man and his need (anthropology) and the manner of the work of Christ in meeting that need (soteriology).

The errors with which the Reformation contended, on the other hand, did not concern the doctrine of the person of Christ (since the Chalcedonian ontology was then generally accepted) but rather the anthropological and soteriological aspects of the Gospel. Moreover, the Reformation confessions were consciously scriptural in their orientation, as were the creeds of the early centuries. There is, accordingly, no conflict in principle between the two (as Bishop Aulen has recently reminded us). The one like the other was a response to the specific demands of its own day. But the creeds were not superseded or invalidated by the confessional documents of the Reformation period. On the contrary, just as each successive creed incorporated and expanded, according to contemporary necessity, what had preceded, so also the Reformation filled out the creeds according to the necessity of its time, openly acknowledging their authenticity and demonstrably including their teachings in its own formularies.

Today we are faced with the demand of some that confessions and creeds should be thrown on the scrap-heap as useless products belonging to an outmoded past. This demand must be resisted. We should consider, rather, how, in view of the uncertainties and errors of our times, the confession of the faith may be formulated to meet the needs of this generation. This cannot mean the abandonment of the truth enshrined in primitive creeds and Reformed confessions (any more than the latter abandoned the former), for, *as truth*, its validity is constant for every age. The clear doctrines to which, for instance, the Thirty-Nine Articles bear witness will not be discarded or pared down, but will be incorporated in any new formulation—and, where it is seen to be needful, filled out with reference to the particular requirements of the present time. There is certainly need today, one would suggest, for a fuller definition of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and of the significance for both Church and world of the doctrine of the future coming of Christ at the end of the age.

We need perhaps to be reminded that the contemporary relevance of, say, the Nicene Creed, which defined more fully the doctrine of the person of Christ, and of the Reformation statements, which defined more fully the doctrine of the work of Christ, answering to pressing requirements of their respective ages, has become a permanent relevance for the Church in every age. Both doctrines were equally true and important in the fourth and in the sixteenth centuries, and again are equally true in our century. As the old hymn says: "Thy truth unchanged hath ever stood".

In the light of what has been said above, then, we may attempt to state, or restate, in summary form, the primary articles of belief which, in harmony with early creeds and Reformed confessions, and above all in harmony with Holy Scripture, the only fountainhead of authentic doctrine, need to be unambiguously affirmed today:

1. The absolute supremacy and sovereignty of Almighty God as Creator, Redeemer, and Judge of the whole world.
2. The creaturely finiteness, fallenness, and sinfulness of all mankind and man's inability to procure or merit, in whole or in part, his own salvation.
3. The eternal existence and deity of Christ, the Son of God.
4. The incarnation of Christ by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem.
5. The complete and final sufficiency of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, where He suffered the Righteous for the unrighteous, as the only atonement and satisfaction for the sins of the world.
6. The actual resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in a glorified body and His actual ascension into heaven in that same body.
7. The reality of the power of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, poured out on mankind on the Day of Pentecost.
8. The necessity for the Holy Spirit's dynamic, transforming activity in the heart (understood as the innermost focus of man's being) if the miracle of the new birth through the grace of God in Christ Jesus is to be experienced, and the moral responsibility of the regenerate man to walk, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the law of God.
9. The Christian hope of the coming again, at the end of this age, of Jesus Christ to judge both the living and the dead and to bring in, as the consummation of the redemption He has procured for us, the new heavens and the new earth, freed for ever from all defilement and imperfection and filled with His glory.
10. Meanwhile, the authority and sufficiency of Holy Scriptures in all matters of faith, worship, and conduct, as the Word of God written for our instruction in the way of eternal life.

When error threatens to overwhelm the truth (and only the blind will deny that this is the situation again in the Church today) then the confessional affirmation of the authentic faith becomes imperative for

the sake of the truth which alone can make men free, and for the glory of God by whom we have been entrusted with this truth. Nicea shows this; so also does the Reformation. We call upon the Church to confess once more now, and without equivocation, the faith once for all delivered. And if the Church will not do this, each single Christian must be prepared, in the day of crisis, to be an *Athanasius contra mundum*—and it may not be inappropriate to remember that the world against which Athanasius stood firm was, in large measure, the world of ecclesiastical officialdom!

In the minds of some, unfortunately, confessionalism is associated with the idea of schismatic sectarianism. A blanket judgment which places confessionalism and sectarianism in the same category may be convenient, but it betrays an insensitiveness to both reason and history. It is not reasonable to assume, as this mentality seems to do, that where there has been a separation the smaller group is necessarily in the wrong and must be held guilty of schism and sectarianism; for, while human nature is all too ready to manifest the insolence and arrogance that the feeling of belonging to the majority encourages, it is very far from being the case that the majority is always right. That might is right is the philosophy of tyrants—and cowards. Historically, too, there is ample evidence that it is not always the group which breaks away that is guilty of schism. The young Athanasias was not wrong for opposing the bishops at Nicea, nor, later as bishop, for being driven out of his diocese by *force majeure*. In the sixteenth century, the papal church, which was the powerful majority, by refusing to reform the corruptions and abandon the errors which had been shown to be unscriptural, left the Reformers no option but to break away so that scriptural truth might be restored and genuine catholicity recovered. The guilt of schism rested on Rome, not on the Reformation. It should not be forgotten, however, that on their other flank the Reformers had to contend with the problem of anabaptism, and that their work was perhaps threatened as much by the ecclesiastical perfectionism of the anabaptists as by the antagonism of the papists. The anabaptist mentality, which was then in evidence on the Continent rather than in England, continues to be a problem for the Church and seems to be irremediably fissiparous and schismatic by nature.

In England, the golden era of churchmanship under Edward VI and Elizabeth I, when there was a Reformed and united national church, was rudely shattered by sectarian inflexibility in the seventeenth century, culminating in the tragedy of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 and the disruption of English Christianity. The guilt of schism here rested, once again, with the majority then in power, which imposed requirements so far beyond the limits of Christian charity and expediency that good men—including some two thousand of the clergy—found themselves forced for conscience' sake to leave the church they loved. It was in 1662 that English denominationalism was virtually forced into being; and it has remained on the scene ever since. In the eighteenth century, the unsympathetic attitude of the ecclesiastical powers to the people who called themselves Methodists impelled the latter to form themselves into a separate denomination, to the impoverishment of the Church of England. Again, over the last hundred

years the introduction of doctrines and practices alien to the spirit and the letter of the Book of Common Prayer has further seriously weakened the *Ecclesia Anglicana* by causing great numbers to leave the church of their fathers in sadness and bewilderment and to seek a spiritual home among one of the more recent denominations. So the sorry story has unfolded.

The phenomenon of denominationalism and also of confessionalism is indeed a consequence of the presence of sin in the world and, more particularly, in the Church. So far from being in themselves evil, denominationalism and confessionalism have played an important role in keeping the light of evangelical truth burning when alien winds of falsehood have threatened to extinguish it. But it must also be said that denominationalism which is self-vaunting and makes claims to perfection is harmful and schismatic. It has allied itself with sectarianism. So long as there is sin in human society, confessionalism will have a necessary function to fulfil as a preservative of the truth, and denominationalism, with all its imperfections, must be expected to continue. In other words, the ideal of one Church comprising a single united people of God will be realized only in the new heavens and the new earth when God dwells with His people and the former things have passed away (Rev. 21: 1ff.).

It is sin in the Church which defeats the consummation of this ideal throughout history. Even in the age of the apostles, members of the Church were making divisive sectarian claims (cf. 1 Cor. 1: 10ff.). The heresies which sprang up in the early centuries were forms of sectarianism or perverted denominationalism. And the heresies are still with us, in the Church, and in the denominations of our day. Indeed, no facade of ecclesiastical organization (not even that of Roman Catholicism) can hide the fact that there are denominations within the denominations—divisions, factions, rivalries within all the churches, papal as well as protestant. Denominationalism, then, though not the ideal, is justifiable because of the grave imperfections in the history of the Church. The issues involved will, however, be better understood if we maintain a distinction between denominationalism (which in a particular historical situation is justifiable) and sectarianism (which is never justifiable). Separation is never defensible where the proclamation of the pure Word of God and the due administration of the sacraments of the Gospels are available.

The situation in England today is such that, with the rise and spread of denominationalism over the past three centuries, the Church of England has ceased to be, except in a formal sense, the church of the nation. The question of the extent to which the continued existence of this denominationalism is still justifiable is now quite rightly being considered—for history teaches us not only that at certain critical moments separation and the resultant denominationalism may be right and necessary, but also that with the passage of time and the changing of circumstances the justification for continuing separation may disappear and old breaches should be healed. It may be, of course, that the impetus and dynamic of a denomination's confessionalism has been lost, in which case the reason for its separateness has been lost too. Thus, if the Church of England were to abandon its

Reformed heritage and revert to the beliefs and practices of Romanism, its separate existence, together with its Reformed confession of faith and Book of Common Prayer, would no longer have any meaning. On the other hand, if the Roman Catholic Church were to submit itself to a radical reformation in the light of Holy Scripture, such as the Church of England experienced in the sixteenth century, then the reunion of the two churches would be just and right.

But, to return to the more immediate question of Anglicanism and nonconformity in England (and elsewhere), there are many who feel that the moment is approaching for the binding up of old divisions. If this is so largely because the thrust of former confessionalism has played itself out, the coming together of the denominations as spent forces like driftwood in a backwater is unlikely to do the Church much good. But the denominations, including the Church of England, have become acutely aware of the scandal of the numerous divisions that exist and show a desire to put right, if possible, the errors and wrongs that were perpetrated in the past in the name of religion. We suggest that the recapture of a confessional sense of direction, uncompromising in its biblical and evangelistic orientation, will alone provide the proper impulse towards a unification which is full of meaning and power and purpose.

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(*Note* : This Editorial is part of an essay written for a book which is to be published shortly by the Marcham Manor Press and is given here by arrangement.)