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THE THREE CREEDS

David Phillips

A generation or two ago every regular Sunday service in the Church of England would have included the recitation of either the Nicene or Apostles' Creeds. Today, however, it is possible to attend some churches week by week and rarely hear them read.

In the 1980 Alternative Services Book these two Creeds were not optional and although some alternative affirmations of faith were later introduced they were not part of the ASB itself. Common Worship changed the situation considerably, although the services really only reflect what was already happening in many churches. At the Lord's Supper it is still expected that the Nicene Creed should be used but *'on occasion the Apostle's Creed or an authorized Affirmation of Faith may be used'*. In *A Service of the Word* there should be *'an authorized Creed, or, if occasion demands, an authorized Affirmation of Faith'*. However, this requirement can be dispensed with at anything other than the 'principal service'. The effect is that where churches hold two Sunday services there need be no affirmation or creed at all in the second service.

Why are the creeds now used so little? One reason, as Common Worship clearly recognises, is that people want variety in liturgy and therefore as with most other texts a multitude of alternatives are given. No alternative Creeds are provided except the Athanasian Creed in the Prayer Book version although it is permitted to use the Apostles' Creed instead of the Nicene Creed at the Lord's Supper. (Using the Nicene Creed without the *filioque* clause is also permitted - the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.)

However, there are other affirmations of faith that can be used instead of the Creeds. The alternatives include a credal hymn which closely follows the Apostle's Creed and also four affirmations composed almost entirely of direct Scriptural quotation (Phil 2.-11, 1 Cor 15.3-7 etc).

A further reason for the demise of the Creeds is that many churches want shorter texts in order to keep the use of liturgy to a minimum. This does not only affect the Creed, Bible readings have also been squeezed out in the interests of brevity. The change does not seem to make services noticeably shorter since the time saved is devoted to more songs, notices and long introductions.

As a result in many churches the Apostle's Creed and Nicene Creed are now something of a rarity. Does this really matter, particularly if they are replaced by an affirmation based on Scripture?

The purpose of a creed

Both the Apostle's and Nicene Creed had their origins as baptismal affirmations. In its present form the Apostle's creed is relatively late but creeds similar to it were apparently in use by the second and third centuries. The Nicene Creed was likewise adapted from a baptismal Creed that was submitted to the Council of Nicea for consideration.

When people became Christians from pagan backgrounds it was important that they were taught the Christian faith. Creeds were a neat summary of that faith and were used as part of the teaching process. This is reflected in our Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer where the Apostle's Creed is recited and then the candidate asked questions about it. Because a creed was taught to new believers it was only natural that they would be asked to assent to or recite it at baptism. Therefore,

since very early days a Creed has been a key part of the baptismal liturgy and the dominant Creed used for this in the western Church has been the Apostle's Creed. Regrettably the Church of England revoked this long tradition in 1980 and replaced the Creed by a short series of questions. Part of the driving force behind Common Worship was a return to ancient practice and initially the new Baptism service allowed only the Apostle's Creed. Within a couple of years the Synod weakened this by allowing a shorter and much weaker affirmation where there are 'strong pastoral reasons' to do so.

The Creeds are therefore not additional truth but merely a summary of Scriptural faith, a sort of early and brief systematic theology. Their value begins and ends with the fact that they are Scriptural as is demonstrated by Article 8 of the Thirty-Nine articles:

The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture.

In our own day when there seems to be far greater ignorance about the Christian faith both outside and within the churches the Creeds ought to have a place in our teaching. It is true that they do not address some of the key issues of our day, for example they say nothing about the nature or authority of the Bible. However, this is because those who produced these Creeds did not doubt that the Bible was the Word of God and therefore carried all the authority of God. What we can say is that the Nicene Creed provides a summary of the Christian faith that has stood the test of time. It describes the nature of God and it sets out the work of God in creation, in salvation through Christ, in the world today through the Holy Spirit and in the future return and judgement of Christ. The Creeds can provide a useful outline for a preaching series, an introduction to the Christian faith, a home study group or an in depth discipleship group.

Because the Creeds provide a summary of Biblical truth they have also functioned as statements of the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. This is particularly true of the Nicene Creed that began as a baptismal creed but was then modified to state the truth more clearly by denying erroneous views about the nature and deity of the Lord Jesus. This is an important feature of truth that is out of favour in our day. If one thing is true then others are false. Moreover, it is sometimes safer to state what is true by denying the alternatives because in doing so we are not pretending to be able to fully define or understand the truth we declare. In dealing with the nature of the eternal God this approach is especially necessary.

The dangers of creeds.

Despite their benefits there are problems with Creeds.

First, they are not Scripture and should never be seen as such. Sometimes people appear to treat them as if they had exactly the same authority as God's Word but they do not. Their authority is a derived authority because, as Article 8 indicates, they can be proved from Scripture and because the Church has deemed them valuable. In principle they could be revised if it could be demonstrated that they were inconsistent with Scripture or that they were misleading. However, with humility we have to accept that the Creeds have stood the test of time.

Secondly, the Creeds are limited in what they cover. It is notable that the Reformers did not draw up any new creeds but they devoted a lot of attention to articles of faith that covered far more ground. These articles have no general place in public worship, although they would often be preached.

Thirdly, it is easy to repeat the words without thinking or indeed without truly accepting or believing what we are saying. This is a danger with all liturgical texts because there it is easy to find that the words come out of our mouths but not from our hearts . Nevertheless, we cannot blame the texts themselves for this, it can happen just as easily with Bible reading, the problem is with us.

Fourthly, the Creeds can give the impression that what saves us is knowledge. People may come to think that if we wish to be saved we must have a sufficient and clear grasp of these statements that we understand them fully and accept perfectly what they teach. But faith requires knowledge as is addressed in a separate article (Damned if you don't).

Despite the dangers the Creeds have stood the test of time, they have proved valuable to generations of Christians. It may be tempting to think that we are somehow better than those who have gone before us and that we can get by without the Creeds, but wisdom and humility ought to help us to see that these statements are not just of historical interest but of real value to our churches today.