

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Number 218

Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

April 2003

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/>

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Rethinking the Apostles' Creed

Clifton R. Loucks

The central message of the Bible is that the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Saviour from sin, and the only safety from God's righteous punishment of sin. The only way of salvation is through belief in the purpose of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (*1 Corinthians* 3:11). The Apostle Paul proclaims Christ crucified as the only antidote to the deadly venom within man, called sin. He wrote: "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (*1 Corinthians* 2:2). The Apostle wrote of the importance of this Gospel:

I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures [*1 Corinthians* 15:1-4].

Evidently, the Apostle believed that the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ was of primary importance, a message to be understood by both those who have already trusted in Christ for their eternal state, and those who were yet to hear the Gospel. Notice from the text that Paul did not invent this Gospel. No, he received it, and he delivered it just as it was declared to him. He mentions the Gospel as the first and most important part of his preaching: "I delivered [the Gospel] unto you *first of all*;" that is, Paul taught the Gospel that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures first, and that Gospel is to be proclaimed first in proclaiming the Word of Life to others. *The Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be central in the Christian's proclamation of whole counsel of God to the world*, for it is written,

[T]he Gospel of Christ...is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith [*Romans* 1:16-17].

Knowing what that Gospel is, and believing it, is of first importance for those who proclaim the Word of God. If it is not first in importance, but somewhere down the list of things to be taught, or absent from the list entirely, confusion (frequently fatal) results. How shall the justified live by faith, if the object

of that faith is unknown, or at best, obscured? If the professed Christian doesn't understand the meaning of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, how can he give a clarion call to those without hope and without God in the world? Our proclamation to others, as well our rehearsals of what we believe in our congregations, is vital: It is life-giving, or life-withholding, depending upon the content of the proclamation. When an unbeliever enters our assemblies of worship, does he hear this vital truth proclaimed clearly, or is the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection obscured? Our words are spiritual, and have spiritual effects upon the hearers: Death and life are in the power of the tongue, Solomon wrote; and John, guided by the Spirit, accurately wrote down Jesus' words: "It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh profits nothing: My words are Spirit, and they are Life" (*John* 6:63).

The Purpose of a Creed

Part of that vital proclamation of the Gospel is the practice of publicly reciting creeds and confessions. Public recitations of creeds should not be mindless rituals of repetition, like the chants and drones of unbelievers. Recitation, so it is said, aids in the understanding of Christian doctrine; but it may not do so, if the recitation is done or heard inattentively, or the creed itself is not faithful to the Gospel. Supposedly, the congregation's "one voice" in reciting a creed reflects its unity in one belief as well. Yet, what do individual minds (and there is no other kind) understand by what they say? Is there unity of thought and meaning of the particular words expressed? Or is the creed ambiguous or incomplete?

Creeds are expressions of what one believes to be truth. According to Philip Schaff, "The first object of creeds was to distinguish the Church from the world, from Jews and heathen, afterwards orthodoxy from heresy, and finally denomination from denomination" (*The Creeds of Christendom*, 1, 8). Creeds are important in that they "nail down" in writing what is believed to be true, never changing, and worthy of belief. ("Creed," of course, is from the Latin "credo," I believe.) But not all creeds are equally worthy of belief or expression.

The Apostles' Creed is a case in point. It has a long history behind it, and in its longevity, it is unchallenged as the Christian's creed; yet is it Christian? The apostles knew nothing of the Apostles' Creed, for it emerged some three centuries after their passing, its author(s) lost to history. It has the honorific label "Apostles" attached to it, as if they created it, recited it, and endorsed it; when they neither wrote, recited, nor endorsed the creed attributed to them. Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Anglicans, Liberals, and Protestants all recite

the Apostles' Creed, yet the Reformers thought rightly that the Roman Catholic Church with its papacy is Antichrist. How can this be? Rome has recently called Protestant dissenters to its hierarchy and doctrine, "separated brethren," and continues to attempt to end the separation by such means as ecumenical councils, documents, and creeds. The Apostles' Creed is one ecumenical bridge over the gap. The Apostles' Creed is a lowest-common denominator attempt at ecumenism.

The Apostles' Creed Examined

The Apostles' Creed does not perform the requisite functions of a creed: It does not accurately summarize the content of Christian belief; it omits essential Christian doctrines; it does not distinguish heterodoxy from orthodoxy; and it is ambiguous, rather than clear. Because of these defects, it cannot unify the hearts of God's people, for, as an ecumenical creed, it allows many who do not hold to the Gospel revealed by God to profess to be Christians.

It is not that creeds *per se* should be done away with, for creeds may be very useful; but rather that the content of a creed should reflect Scripture more accurately and completely. One may ask: How close must a creed come to Scripture? The answer is, Close enough so that Christian believers will find in it the truths they hold precious, and those who do not believe the Gospel will find the creed unacceptable. The Apostles' Creed does not meet Schaff's desideratum: "A Creed...is a confession of faith for public use, or a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church" (*Creeds*, 1,3-4).

God's revealed truth divides men; but it also is the only basis of Christian unity. As Christian believers, we are to confess the same things, to speak the same words, to believe the same propositions regarding God, man, and salvation. Further, those confessions are what set us apart from the world and the unorthodox. The Apostle Paul says in *1 Corinthians* 1:10: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Among many other applications of this verse, it gives creeds and confessions credence. God's people, and only God's people, are "to join together in the same mind, in the same judgment, speaking the same thing, without division." Paul says Christians are to be unified in thought, not in organization; unified by the words of our great God of Truth. But if the words of a creed join together believer and unbeliever, Protestant, Roman, Anglican, Liberal, and Greek, then the creed has failed to achieve Christian unity, but has accomplished the purpose of the enemy, who sows tares among wheat.

The Apostles' Creed reads:

- (1) I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of Heaven and Earth.
- (2) And in Jesus Christ his only (begotten) Son our Lord;
- (3) who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
- (4) born of the Virgin Mary;
- (5) suffered under Pontius Pilate,
- (6) was crucified, dead, and buried;
- (7) he descended into Hell;
- (8) the third day he rose from the dead;
- (9) he ascended into Heaven;
- (10) and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
- (11) from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
- (12) I believe in the Holy Ghost;
- (13) the Holy Catholic Church;
- (14) the communion of saints;
- (15) the forgiveness of sins;

- (16) the resurrection of the body;
- (17) and the life everlasting. Amen.

Though I have here parsed the Creed into 17 phrases, it is usually parsed into 12, in accordance with the medieval legend that each of the apostles contributed one of the phrases to the Creed. This hoax—and the name "Apostles' Creed"—were perpetuated by the Roman Church-State, as were many other hoaxes. This hoax was first exposed by Lorenzo Valla, who also exposed the *Donation of Constantine* as a Romanist hoax.

Scripture Articles Not Found in Creed

After reviewing the 17 phrases of the Apostles' Creed, notice that the Apostles' Creed neither mentions essential articles of the faith nor defines the terms it uses. Thus it becomes, at best, a mere mentioning of terms, not a confession of well-defined truths revealed by God for our instruction. Is it any wonder that many in society misrepresent Christianity as superstitious in belief and practice? If words are left undefined, and spoken as ritual, then they are no more a confession of God's revealed truth than those spoken by a magician while performing his art.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* seems to say that the Apostles' Creed expresses the very things, termed "Articles of our catholic, undoubted faith," necessary for a Christian to believe: that is, it supposedly expresses that which a person must believe to be a Christian. A children's primer based upon the *Heidelberg Catechism* titled *A First Book of Christian Doctrine*, by Hylkema and Tuuk, tells us that we are to believe "Everything God tells us in the Holy Scriptures." Well and good. It goes on to ask: "Why must we believe all that the Bible contains?" It answers: "Because it is the Word of God himself." A very profound answer. Then it asks, "Where can we find a short statement of everything God commands us to believe?" (This question itself seems a bit contrived given the previous answer and command "to believe everything God tells us," does it not?) The primer answers: "In The Apostles' Creed." Now, does this Creed contain "everything God commands us to believe," even in summary? Does the Apostles' Creed express that which a person must believe to be a Christian? Is it the "litmus test" of one's Christian faith? Ponder these omissions of some of the articles of our Christian faith.

1. The Creed is silent on Christ's satisfaction of the Father's justice. The term and concept of propitiation are absent.

2. The Creed is silent on Christ's substitutionary death. The term and concept of Atonement are absent.

3. The Creed is silent on the purpose of Christ's death. His death is mentioned, but an historical event, without an explanation of its meaning, is not a Christian confession. The Pharisees also believed Christ died. Christians must confess, "Christ died for our sins."

4. The Creed is silent on Scripture. In his summary of the Gospel, Paul wrote: "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures." How can a Creed derive its authority from Scripture if it does not even mention it? Perhaps this is one reason why the pope can confess the Apostles' Creed too: Belief in Scripture is omitted, but belief in the "Holy Catholic Church" is included.

5. The Creed is silent on the inspiration of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the sufficiency of Scripture, the necessity of Scripture, the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture, the power of Scripture, the coherence of Scripture, etc. The Apostles' Creed describes the "Catholic Church" as "Holy," but not the Word of God.

6. The Creed is silent on the Trinity. Although all three Persons are mentioned, the unity of the Godhead is not expressed, and only one Person is confessed as God. The Creed is so vague that its confessors may believe in three

gods, or that only God the Father is God, and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are lesser beings.

7. The Creed is silent on the Gospel. The term and concept are absent. It makes no reference to the method and means of salvation. Salvation by God's grace alone is not mentioned.

8. The Creed is silent on justification by faith in Christ alone. One would think a creed would say something about justification and faith. The Apostles' Creed does not.

9. The Creed is silent on predestination, and election. It contains not even a hint of an eternal divine plan for the salvation of God's people.

10. The Creed is silent on regeneration and sanctification—the new birth and the Christian life.

11. The Creed is silent on confession of sin to God, and offers no definition of sin.

12. The Creed mentions Pontius Pilate, but is silent on the Person of the Holy Spirit. "I believe in the Holy Ghost" does not express much of anything. Would any listener figure out who he is or what he does? The Apostles' Creed does not even say that the Holy Ghost is God. Amazing, isn't it? Did I say amazing? I meant appalling.

13. The Creed implies that only the Father is Creator. John says that "*All things were made by him [the Logos].*" Job and the *Psalms* proclaim that the Spirit "made the heavens and all the hosts of them."

So what kind of creedal expression is the Apostles' Creed? It is a lowest-common denominator ecumenical confession, apparently designed to please everyone in the churches, except the Christians. It is not, as Schaff believes, "the Creed of creeds." Nor does it "contain all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith necessary to salvation" (*Creeds*, 1, 14).

Omission of these central truths leaves many doors open for cunning persons to bind unsuspecting souls in ecclesiastical chains. Without God's wrath fully appeased once for all by Christ's death, we must sacrifice Christ afresh every day and work for our own salvation. The Apostles' Creed does nothing to preclude or dispel damnable heresies such as the mass, taught by the largest religious organization on the planet. Schaff reports that "its [the Creed's] triumph over all the other forms in the Latin Church was not completed till the eighth century, or about the time when the bishops of Rome strenuously endeavored to conform the liturgies of the Western churches to the Roman order" (1,19).

Creed Articles Not Found in Scripture

These words of this ecumenical Creed—"He descended into Hell"—tend to confuse, not explain, the belief of the Christian. Must one believe that Christ went to Hell after his death and before he rose from the dead? (This is how the Apostles' Creed states it by its word order.) What is the basis for this belief? In his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism* Ursinus tried to explain this clause as Christ suffering the pains of Hell before he died. But that is not what the Apostles' Creed says. Then why do we continue to say this line publicly, in our congregations, if it isn't true? Why do we say what we do not mean? Why don't we say what we mean and mean what we say? Honesty requires that churches not continue to recite a confession that they do not believe. I suspect we continue to recite this creed because we've always done it that way. It is a church tradition, and church tradition has become more important than confessing Scriptural truth. Bad habits—especially bad ecclesiastical habits—are hard to break.

What do unbelievers think as they attend our assemblies and hear us say, "He [Jesus Christ] descended into Hell" after his death, and then try to explain away the obvious meaning of the words by saying that Christ really didn't go to Hell? Why should they believe anything else they hear in our assemblies? Perhaps we have an esoteric interpretation of other statements

as well. Intellectual dishonesty—or ecclesiastical dishonesty—will not persuade anyone to listen to the rest of our teaching.

Scripture, of course, describes the suffering of Christ. But unlike the ecumenical creed, the Scriptures also accurately reveal the meaning and time of his suffering. If one wishes to take a Biblical, rather than a traditional, approach, one could confess: "He suffered on the cross for our sins, according to the Scriptures." But even this is not quite complete: He suffered throughout his life: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted..." (*Isaiah* 53:3-4). He suffered in the garden of Gethsemane, as *Luke* 22:44 records: "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." He suffered in the trial: "And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified. And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium.... And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head, and began to salute him, Hail, King of the Jews. And they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him, and bowing their knees worshiped him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him" (*Mark* 15:15-20). He suffered in the wilderness, for 40 days and more. He was dragged by the devout congregation from the synagogue in Nazareth to the top of the hill to be murdered on the Sabbath. He was called a drunkard, a glutton, a demoniac, and insane. The epistles give further explanation of our Lord's suffering, and even an answer to his searching question ("My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?") upon the cross: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (*Galatians* 3:13-14).

But even in the Old Testament, in the very place where we find those vivid descriptions of Christ's sufferings, we also find the reason for His suffering: "Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.... He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed...and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.... [F]or the transgression of my people was he stricken."

One does not need to travel far from the Biblical descriptions of Christ's suffering to learn the meaning of it all: God's sufficient Word does not keep us hanging in suspense. But the Apostles' Creed does. Nowhere does it state the meaning of Christ's death; nowhere does it proclaim a finished Atonement, or for that matter, any Atonement at all. By its words, "He descended into Hell," confusion is bred and false doctrine—the doctrine of purgatory—is inculcated. It is an example of not saying what we mean, and saying what we do not mean. It is an example of ecclesiastical lying.

Another example of this—not saying what we mean, and saying what we don't mean—is found in the words: "I believe...in the Holy Catholic Church." This clause is such a source of confusion that disclaimers need to be made for it upon its every utterance, and it isn't the only one. Reformed churches, born out of the Protestant Reformation, do not mean the alleged "church" of Rome when reciting this creed. Commonly, Reformed and Protestant preachers will give a disclaimer immediately following the recitation of the Creed to the effect that the Creed is not to be construed as meaning the Roman Catholic Church, which calls itself "the Holy Catholic

Church." If Protestants mean "We believe that there is an elect people of God that the Lord Himself gave out of the whole of mankind to the Son, and this people is 'the church' in view, known in Scripture as *the very small remnant*, and *the only true children of Abraham*," then they should say so: "I believe that God has chosen and saved his own people out of every race and nation." This would maintain the antithesis between true and false, which distinction is blurred by the confusing term "Holy Catholic Church." When Rome decides to call "home" the "separated brethren" of the Protestant churches, she will no doubt use the ambiguous terminology of this very Creed to further her aim. The call will be legitimized by the gentle reminder that "we all believe in the one Holy Catholic Church, do we not? You've been confessing it in your churches for centuries; now come home, come home to the one place you've been confessing for all those generations. Mother Kirk has her arms spread wide to embrace you."

Protestant Reformers protested against that very institution, the organization calling itself the Holy Catholic Church, which is a governmental power, a nation unto itself, and not a church at all. Roman Catholics recite this Creed, using the same words, without disclaimers, and people know very well what they mean. Why adopt their confession? Why can we not frame the words of a true confession to reflect Scripture? Such a confession would be truly apostolic, for it would contain the apostolic doctrine. Of course, confessing that "God has chosen and saved his own people out of every race and nation" doesn't restrict the elect to an institutional church, which might be a stumblingblock to the traditionalists; but it was no problem for the apostle who penned a letter to "the strangers scattered throughout...Asia...elect, according to...God...the Spirit...and Jesus Christ..." The Elect of God were strangers in the world, and strangers to each other. That is why we are not to neglect entertaining strangers.

This clause, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church" is followed by a confession of "the communion of saints," and then by "the forgiveness of sins," with no explanation given as to how one can have forgiveness. Out of all the things of importance in life, how one obtains forgiveness of sins is absolutely vital. Since it follows on the heels of "the Holy Catholic Church," would it not plausibly follow that forgiveness comes through and because of that Holy Catholic Church? It is strongly suggested by the word order of the Creed. But the truth is, of course, that forgiveness of sins neither comes through nor because of the church. Since the church consists of those who are already forgiven, why isn't forgiveness mentioned before the church? Forgiveness is based upon God justifying his people, which forgiven people are then called saints and form the church universal throughout time and throughout the world. One possible—and plausible—reason for the order in the Apostles' Creed is the false teaching that the dispenser of forgiveness is not God, but the Holy Catholic Church. That large and influential religious organization based in Rome teaches that very thing: Forgiveness comes from its authority, through its priests and sacraments. There is no ambiguity as to their teaching in this regard; the ambiguity lies in Protestants' using the same words to confess some different meaning. Christians are to proclaim clearly what they mean, and not speak in ambiguities that confuse others. A creed should declare truth plainly. Another problem is that the clause "I believe in...the communion of saints" follows "the Holy Catholic Church" clause, suggesting that that communion is within "the Holy Catholic Church."

Further, does the confession of a communion of saints, even properly defined, belong in a basic creed? That is, is it an essential point, without which we are not believers? Elijah didn't know that 7,000 were reserved by the Lord until the Lord told him so. Was Elijah not a believer before he was so

informed? Of course he was. Salvation is not corporate; it is individual. It is received from God immediately, not mediated through the church.

The Creed says, "I believe...in the Holy Ghost." Well, so do the Jehovah's Witnesses. The question is: What are you confessing when you say those words? Jehovah's Witnesses believe in the Holy Ghost as a "radar beam" of God's power (their words, at my door, many times) but not as a Person of the Trinity. They believe that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force used by God to direct people and things. The Apostles' Creed does not rule out such a notion. To say: "I believe in the Holy Ghost," is not to say very much. The clause is devoid of definition, of predication, and therefore of clarity. It does not distinguish between meanings that differ, for no meaning is given. The antithesis between false doctrine and true teaching is absent. The clause as it occurs in the ecumenical Apostles' Creed is devoid of the meaning that would make it Christian, *i.e.*, Scriptural. Some would say that the very structure of the creed lends itself to the idea of God being triune in nature. After all, it proclaims a sentence about the Father creating, several statements about the Son, historically speaking anyway, and then a brief mention of a Holy Ghost, which, it is claimed, all people must (somehow) understand to "complete the trio" of personalities within the Godhead. Three parts to the Creed must equal three Persons "in God," it is assumed.

Is the Apostles' Creed less than accurate? We have seen that it is. Is it less than Biblically sufficient? Absolutely. There are deficiencies in this Creed in that central doctrines are not expressed. This allows common confession of the Creed with Antichrist.

A Challenge

The Creed substitutes unexplained statements of historical events for the Gospel of an atoning Christ who is the perfect satisfaction of holy justice for his elect people. A new Christian creed is necessary to replace the truncated, misnamed, and misleading Apostles' Creed. But there will be opposition from traditionalists, unbelieving church members, and ecumenists. Christians who take Scripture and creeds seriously, desiring a creed that accurately summarizes Scripture, must resist them. The question is: Will the Reformed churches put away the so-called Apostles' Creed of the Roman Church-State, or will they continue to recite it, obscuring the Gospel and erasing the distinction between a true church and a false? Will they practice the first mark of a true church of Jesus Christ—as defined by Guido de Bres in the Belgic Confession, "the preaching of the pure Gospel"—or will they sink deeper into the mire of "unity first" thinking? Will the Gospel of justification by faith alone be clearly expressed to those whom God brings to their assemblies? Shall it contain *the evangel*, the Gospel of the *Christ who died for the sins of his people*, explained according to the authority of the *Scriptures*, or omit it for the sake of peace, unity, and tradition, as the Apostles' Creed has done for many centuries? Whether an individual like Guido de Bres, or sessions or synods, write a new creed—it must express the central doctrines of the faith accurately. What words will *form Christ's mind in us, the hope of glory*? His church is *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone*. For no other foundation can be laid, nor should be laid, *than the Lord Jesus Christ, the Logos, the Word of God Himself*. As Paul gave good confession before the court, we are to *believe all that is written in the Law and in the Prophets*.

Announcement

The Trinity Foundation plans to release a new book in June: *The Current Justification Controversy* by O. Palmer Robertson.