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"Faith and Creed."

(An address given to the London University Theological Students' Union, at Regent's Park College, on Friday, February 23rd, 1921; now printed in commemoration of the sixteenth centenary of the Creed of Nicaea (1925).

IF we had been meeting to discuss the subject of "Faith and Creed" half a century ago, I might have begun by quoting the obvious couplet to which the representative poet of the Victorian age had given the currency of a proverb:—

"There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds."

But in this Georgian epoch, I can quote it only in a Revised Version, in view of present tendencies and present needs:—

"There lives more faith in honest creeds,
Believe me, than in half the doubts."

When doubts have become a conventional fashion, most men need to be told that there is something to be said for creeds, and that morality cannot afford to dispense with religion. Every faith involves a creed, and our subject is not the perilous and rather stupid antithesis, "Faith *or* Creed," but "Faith *and* Creed." Faith is a personal trust and loyalty; creed is the intellectual analysis, more or less authoritative, of the belief which that trust implies. We must distinguish clearly between them, but only to do justice to their ideal unity.

Most of us, when we are young, are in too great a hurry to find a formula by which to live; then, when one formula after another proves inadequate to the complex art of living, some men turn away from all formulae as useless. We are rightly eager to discover the secret of the happy life; we are wrongly expectant that someone will be able to formulate it in a manner exactly suited to our individual needs. I have a keen remembrance of my own impatience as a student with one preacher or speaker or writer after another who led me along some promising path, only to leave me at what seemed a parting of the ways, if not in a blind alley. I am more charitable towards them to-day, not simply because I have learnt how hard it is to make truth living, but even more because I am convinced that in every man's path of faith there is a point where he must choose for himself, a point at

which the will must reinforce the intellect, a point at which the whole personality must make its venture of faith. We may, indeed, we must, use a creed either explicitly or implicitly in all attempts at religious instruction; but we must not confuse the result of our instruction with personal faith, individual conviction. One great change for the better has come in all modern education, and that is the substitution of the laboratory for the museum, of emphasis on the process rather than on the exhibition of the product. Sir Francis Darwin has told us that "when science began to flourish at Cambridge in the 'seventies, and the University was asked to supply money for buildings, an eminent person objected and said, 'What do they want with their laboratories? Why can't they believe their teachers, who are in most cases clergymen of the Church of England?'" We have learnt, or at least we are learning, that the acquisition of personal faith takes us of necessity into the laboratory of life. The creed has its legitimate and even necessary place, like that of the analytical tables used by the chemist; but you cannot learn chemistry out of a text-book, and you cannot learn faith out of a creed. Begin with the articles of a whole creed and you may worry yourself into the belief that you are not a Christian at all. Begin with some strong conviction of truth, however fragmentary, and give it a fair chance, and it will grow into a creed, as the partial and varied messages of the prophets orb into the revelation of the Son of God.

It is easy to confirm this relation of faith and creed from the beginnings of faith in the New Testament. "It is no accident," says a recent book on *Christianity in History*, in writing which an Anglican and a Free Churchman have shared, "it is no accident that the most typical and sacred form of words in Christianity is not a creed or a law, but a prayer" (p. 33). Indeed, Wellhausen has gone so far as to say that the only adequate form of confession of faith is a prayer. The centre and object of faith, in the living sense of the New Testament is a Person, the Person who both exemplifies and inspires the attitude expressed in "the Lord's Prayer." Dr. Macgregor, in his fine book on *Christian Freedom*, speaks of "the look of the heart towards Christ the Crucified which is the essential element in faith" (p. 165). The New Testament does not, of course, ignore the value of definite and articulate confession. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." The simplicity of *this* creed is significant—"Jesus is Lord." There are many confessions of faith throughout the New Testament

which clearly show that the emphasis falls on trust in and loyalty to the central Person. The two great confessions of faith made by Simon Peter are singularly suggestive in this respect. At Caesarea Philippi, he made the declaration of his conviction, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." That was not the less sincere, because it was theological, but it did not save him from denying Christ. But by the Sea of Galilee, we hear him saying something that was a more profound, if less articulated, confession of faith, "Thou knowest that I love Thee," and that confession became the commission of his renewed apostolate. Living faith, as we shall all agree, demands a loving heart as its only adequate guardian, and the true Christian creed will be the affirmation of that in Christ which has won our loving trust. Such a faith-creed calls for the ripe experience of Christian life, and for the fullest development of Christian personality, in thought and feeling and will. Its full attainment lies at the end, rather than at the beginning of life, and it is an individual achievement, rather than a social inheritance, an ideal rather than a present possession.

II. But it will be said that by creed, in the ordinary use of the term, we mean something different from this, something that is a social inheritance, something that is of use in religious education and propaganda, in legal definition and ecclesiastical unity, as well as in the devotional exercises of the Church. Let us, then, think of creed in this more usual sense, always remembering that this meaning must fall short of that ideal relation to faith of which I have spoken. Every social act involves a compromise—the adjustment of my egoism to that altruism without which social relations are impossible. We learn nothing at school more useful than to put up with other people. We cannot live together in a home, a city, a nation, without respecting the different standpoints of others. We cannot worship together in a church without some compromise of individuality—which is indeed part of the value to us of worship. So when, for any purpose, a community agrees to frame its religious convictions in a creed, there will be an inevitable compromise; you can escape it only by remaining a rank individualist, i.e., not a Christian at all. No two men would spontaneously frame their creed in exactly the same way; even if they agreed on the same form of words there would be subtle differences of emphasis, and enormous differences of connotation in the words employed. We see the differences clearly enough when we leave two communities free to express their faith independently, as for example in the Anglican Catechism and in the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Churches. You may remember that Robert Louis Stevenson said that all the difference between the Scotsman and the Englishman came out in the way those two catechisms begin. The Scotsman comes to the point

with a fine disdain of ephemeral interests, and asks, "What is the chief end of man?" the more sober and prosaic Englishman asks, "What is your name?" But if such differences, in small or great things, always emerge when unchecked and unrepressed, are they not present in any single community, especially when the first generation of creed-framers is succeeded by the second, and the children inevitably fail to be replicas of their parents? I do not, of course, use this fact to argue that creeds are useless, but simply to show some of the limitations of their legitimate use. Used illegitimately, they may and do become not foster-mothers, but bogies to faith. By what they seem to demand, and to demand full-grown from the very beginning—a faith full armoured, like Athene springing from the head of Zeus, they may and do often inhibit faith, and warn people away from trust. The more sincere and the more conscientious a man is, the more he may shirk from professing the full creed of his Church, when he asks himself that very necessary question, "How much of the creed is my faith?" Let us remember, then, the perils of creeds, and the fatal ease with which they may come to be treated as synonymous with faith, by those who are without it. We must have them, in some form or other. How is property, for example, to be legally secured to the use of a religious community, unless there is some definition of its faith, i.e., a creed? How can a Church provide for the training of its young life, and preserve any consistency of right opinion unless there is some epitome of what it holds most worth teaching, and most worth preserving? There is also a true place for the creed in both the private and public devotions of the Church, when we think of the creed as a guide to thought and prayer, a subject for meditation. None has spoken more nobly of this aspect of the creed than Newman, in his *Grammar of Assent*; he singles out the much-criticised Athanasian Creed for his praise:—

"It is not a mere collection of notions, however momentous. It is a psalm or hymn of praise, of confession, and of profound, self-prostrating homage, parallel to the canticles of the elect in the Apocalypse. It appeals to the imagination quite as much as to the intellect. It is the war-song of faith, with which we warn first ourselves, then each other and then all those who are within its hearing, and the hearing of the Truth, who our God is, and how we must worship Him, and how vast our responsibility will be, if we know what to believe and yet believe not. . . . For myself, I have ever felt it is the most simple and sublime, the most devotional formulary to which Christianity has given birth, more so even than the *Veni Creator* and the *Te Deum*." (p. 133.)

But if creeds, notwithstanding these great and necessary uses, always involve some mutual compromise in comparison with an ideal expression of personal faith, even for those who have first united to frame them—how much more will this be felt by many in regard to those great creeds of the Church which we agree to call “historic”?

III. It is obvious that when we speak of a creed as a “historic document” we are considering it in relation to the age which gave birth to it, and not in relation to its utility for faith. Every creed, of course, does bear the mark of its birth upon it, if only by what it inserts or omits. It has been estimated that there are upwards of 150 public confessions of faith which have been or are accepted as authoritative in the Christian Church, an eloquent testimony to the intellectual awakening that characterizes Christianity beyond any other religion. If we were to try and write an adequate commentary on those creeds and confessions, we should find that we had written a history of the Church and a history of the doctrine of the Church throughout its kaleidoscopic changes of character and fortune. Yet each of these creeds claimed to be the statement of eternal and revealed truth—something in itself unchanging. We are forced to admit that the history of the Church thus reflected in the creeds is marked by as many changes as the history of politics, reflected in the successive constitutions and institutions of human society, and as the history of philosophy, reflected in the successive systems of thought. Even a Newman has to formulate a doctrine of development. Yet there must be some real continuity through all this change, if the Church of the ages is in any sense a unity; in what does it lie? Or, to put the same question in another form, what is the essence of the Christian religion? Clearly it must be “something more catholic than its creeds” unless we are to dischurch the majority of our fellow-Christians” (cf. John Caird, *Univ. Sermons*, p. 23) As Dr. John Caird has said, “Could we get at that something—call it spiritual life, godliness, holiness, self-abnegation, surrender of the soul to God, or, better still, love and loyalty to Christ as the one only Redeemer and Lord of the spirit—could we, I say, pierce deeper than the notions of the understanding to that strange, sweet, all-subduing temper and habit of spirit, that climate and atmosphere of heaven in a human breast, would not the essence of religion lie in that?” If we agree to call this something “faith” as distinct from creed, its intellectual expression, then we may rightly claim that faith is much more continuous than creed. I do not say that faith itself remains the same; it is a living thing, and the great characteristic of life is growth, which means change. But the life of the plant is a unity in a sense in which the successive text-books describing

it are not. Take the familiar eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in which the heroes of faith are enumerated. Try to frame a creed which a Samson or a Rahab might have monotoned with an Isaiah or a Jeremiah. You will hardly get past the opening words of the chapter, that faith is a confidence in what is hoped for, and a conviction of what is unseen—a description of faith that would take in all the religions of the world. But if it is said that such an idea of faith is dangerously broad, we may point out the corresponding depth of moral quality in the faith there described. These heroes of faith are depicted as those who are stirred to self-sacrifice in their whole personality—Abraham to go forth not knowing whither he went, and Moses to choose affliction with the people of God. Faith can afford to be very broad in its charities if it is proportionately deep in its self-sacrifice and courage. Let us not make the mistake, therefore, of confusing identity of creed, so far as such a thing really exists, with continuity of faith. We cannot take any of these “historic documents” in its strict original meaning, not even the Apostles’ Creed, to express exactly and naturally our present-day faith. We can read our own meaning more or less into the ancient form of words, but that is a different thing.

IV. Perhaps you are saying, “Enough of generalizations; tell us exactly what value you, as a Free Churchman, attach to such Creeds as the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian.” To answer that question fairly, we must, I think, recall both those principles which have been already outlined and certain facts as to the origin of these creeds. The three principles of which I have spoken are (1) that faith is a larger thing than creed, because it involves emotion and will as well as cognition; (2) that the social use of a creed necessarily involves compromise; (3) that faith is an underlying unity much more continuous than its credal expression would suggest. The historic facts concerning these early creeds must here be simply stated, and not argued, especially as they are generally accepted by scholars. (1) The Apostles’ Creed was not written by the apostles, though it can be traced back more or less to the middle of the second century, as an evident expansion of the baptismal confession. (2) The Nicene Creed is not the Creed of Nicaea, though containing some phrases from it, which have been added to the Creed of Jerusalem to produce the familiar form. (A plausible view of the Nicene Creed would regard it as the expansion of the baptismal confession in the East, as the Apostles’ is a similar expansion in the West). (3) The Athanasian Creed is of quite different character, though like the others, it has gained a name that does not belong to it. It is best regarded as a collection of Augustinian formulae, which seems to have been drawn up in Southern Gaul, in the fifth or sixth century. It is

highly technical, and really unintelligible except to a mind trained in philosophical distinctions and theological history. As to the circulation of these creeds, we must not exaggerate their importance, even as historic documents. The Apostles' Creed is unknown to the Greek and Oriental Churches, and no council of the Church has given it authority. The Athanasian Creed has never been used by the East; it seems to have come into prominence in the West against Muhammedan Unitarianism. The Nicene Creed was approved by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and is used by both East and West. No doubt it is partly on this ground, as well as on that of the character of the Creed, that the Lambeth Resolutions of 1920 give it the central place in the theological foundation of a reunited Church. "We believe," says the Lambeth Report, "that the visible unity of the Church will be found to involve the whole-hearted acceptance of . . . the Creed commonly called Nicene, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith, and either it or the Apostles' Creed as the Baptismal confession of belief." That statement, it will be seen, carries us back to the origin of these creeds, their primary function as a confession of personal faith. How far are they still adequate or useful for the same purpose? This is a question that ought to be answered strictly on internal evidence. The place of these creeds in the history of the Church entitles them to respect; but their adequacy for a modern man's faith is a distinct question. So far as the popular use of the Nicene Creed is concerned, the same objection holds against its more theological part as holds against the Athanasian; how many, even in this august assembly, would face an examination on the exact meaning of "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father"? Further, when this theological part, which mainly distinguishes the Nicene from the Apostles' Creed, has been understood, there is the whole question of its underlying philosophy. How far can the Greek metaphysics of the fourth century really become the basis of a modern Christology? How far have modern thinkers shifted their ground from a metaphysical to an ethical starting-point, for example? Are we really prepared to bind ourselves down to the fourth century interpretation of Christ, as the Roman Catholic Church is bound down to the thirteenth century theology of Aquinas? This is a not unimportant question, which ought to be faced before we consider the whole-hearted acceptance of particular Creeds.

It has sometimes been said that such objections do not lie against the Apostles' Creed, because that simply recites facts of history, which Christians in general agree to accept. Of course, if this were absolutely true, it would take away all religious value from the Apostles' Creed, for religion is concerned with the

valuation of facts, not with "bare facts" in themselves. As Lord Bryce once remarked, "No one at a supreme crisis in his life can nerve himself to action, or comfort himself under a stroke of fate, by reflecting that the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal." Even the selection of historical details involves an interpretation. For instance, the modern man, with his awakened interest in the "Jesus of History," would not leap at once from "Born of the Virgin Mary" to "Suffered under Pontius Pilate," and would probably wish that "He descended into hell" had never been inserted into the original form of the Creed. If the Apostles' Creed was originally directed against Gnostic docetism, then the selection of facts emphasizing the real humanity and historical place of Jesus is explained; but to-day, most of us would assume the real humanity, and need rather to be protected against an under-valuation of the divinity. But I do not want to seem a thankless and ungrateful critic of the two Creeds because I thus remind you of some of their limitations, as statements of personal faith to which whole-hearted acceptance is asked. I would rather venture to indicate these limitations, from a frankly personal and individual point of view, by offering an example of an evangelical creed to which I could subscribe whole-heartedly:—

GOD'S INITIATIVE . . . AN EVANGELICAL CREED.

In the fulness of the time, God sent forth His Son to be the Saviour of the world; Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh; He gave His life a ransom for many; God raised Him from the dead, has committed to Him the issues of time and eternity, and through Him gives the Holy Spirit to them that obey God. The only way of salvation is that of repentance towards God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and new birth through the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, this would be my statement of:—

MAN'S RESPONSE . . . A WORKING FAITH.

In every man there is something of God, which Christ claims. Loyalty to that claim means new strength of character, new power to serve men, new peace of heart with God; it makes of life a fascinating adventure, with somebody caring for us all the way. If we go on, we shall win through, though we stagger under a cross, for in death as in life, we belong to God.

Whatever may be thought of this "creed" and "faith," it is an excellent discipline to compel ourselves to think out these things for ourselves. Any one who does that honestly and very thoroughly will be surprised to find how different in form a modern creed is from the creeds of the ancient Church. But I think he will also find, if he have gained anything that is worth calling a

Christian experience, that there is a real continuity between his own faith and the faith that is so differently expressed by those before him.

V. I have urged these points not to draw the conclusion that there is no value in the ancient creeds, save as historic documents, but simply to make clear the limitations under which they can be properly and intelligently used for religion. Their value is great, if they are frankly used as a testimony and not as a test. Interpret them broadly, as a statement in the vocabulary and thought of their own time of permanent elements of Christian faith—and they may serve a great purpose and be a great help to religion. Apply them in the spirit of the heresy-hunter, as if they were the basis of a legal contract drawn up yesterday, and they are not only an encumbrance to religion, but an instrument of torture to goad the most conscientious people out of the Church. As an example of what I mean by broad interpretation, let me quote the remark made by Professor Curtis that “in the Apostolic age confession fluctuated between three main forms: (1) acceptance of Jesus as Christ, or Lord, or Son of God; (2) acceptance of an outline of the main facts of tradition about His home and life; and (3) acceptance of the threefold Divine self-revelation in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” He then goes on to say, “What came in a later age to be known as the Apostles’ Creed was, in fact, the briefest possible combination of the three.” (E.R.E., III. 834.) In that broad sense, we might fairly expect the main body of Christians to give a whole-hearted acceptance to the Apostles’ Creed, and the same thing applies to the parallel elements in the Nicene Creed. As to the technical theology and philosophy in that Creed, I accept it as representing the best explanation that age could give of the unique relation of Jesus to God, and the unique place of Jesus in history. Believing as I personally do, in the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, I am bound to recognize the Nicene Creed as a noble attempt to express a permanent and most essential element in the Christian faith. In a word, I agree with what it meant, though I cannot assimilate all it says. I accept it as representing the main stream of true Christian continuity. Of course, in the same sense, and with equal rights of intrinsic worth, I should accept the Westminster Confession of Faith. Indeed, the Reformation Creeds, with their emphasis on Anthropology and Soteriology, are needed by the side of the others to supplement the earlier emphasis on Theology and Christology. There is no peculiar virtue in the Nicene Creed, either in character or origin, that entitles it to be set apart from all other creeds; its claim is *de facto* rather than *de jure*. It has come to be the particular form which has gained the widest currency in the Church of the East and the West. It deals com-

pendiously with the fundamental doctrine of the Person of Christ. It also expands in a welcome manner the confession of faith in the Holy Spirit, a doctrine which has been so neglected by the Church in its formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. It was accepted, with other documents, as representing the main current of Christian thought, by a large gathering of bishops who met in the middle of the fifth century. It is probably the expansion of the baptismal creed of Jerusalem. On these grounds it may well take rank as a historic basis of reunion, and I think that Evangelical Free Churchmen could give as whole-hearted an acceptance to it as would the Anglican Church. But this statement must not obscure the fact that there is a real difference of emphasis and atmosphere between Anglicans and Free Churchmen, in regard to the use of creeds.

It may be that such a position as this may seem unsatisfactory to some of my younger fellow-students here, just because it savours of compromise. Young men are often impatient with the readiness of middle-aged men to compromise things, and to put up with the half-loaf. It is the difference that experience brings to most of us, though it may easily be misrepresented. All that I urge is the necessity of compromise on both sides if there is ever to be reunion; the very principle of society demands it. If there is ever to be reunion on the basis of the Nicene Creed, Anglicans must be content to recognize, as by a "Declaratory Act," such as that of the Church of Scotland, the quite general and historical sense in which Free Churchmen are willing to accept it, whilst Free Churchmen must broaden their conceptions of the Church to include in a true catholicity types of thought and forms of expression which are not identical with their own. We all agree to use such a hymn as the *Te Deum*, which covers much the same ground as the Apostles' and Nicene Creed; there is no unworthy compromise in accepting any of the three as a testimony of the faith of the Church, within which our own personal convictions have been nurtured. In the conduct of public worship, I prefer to make the confession of faith in the form of prayer, for that is where we Christians come closest together, because closer to the one Father of us all. It is a suggestive fact that the very words of our Lord upon the cross, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," are used by the dying Jew in his death-bed confession. How wide the gulf that parts the Crucified from His crucifiers! Yet how wonderful that those for whom He prayed, "Father, forgive them," should be turning to the one Father throughout the generations, with *His* dying confession of faith upon their lips!

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.