

Credo

Once upon a time, long ago, the most exciting news of an empire centered on a creed. Emperors, governors and bishops wrangled over and wrestled with each word. These extraordinary labor pains that birthed the creeds of Christendom were rewarded by great honor, for eventually the creeds became the standard, the measuring rod of all true Christians.

All else—politics, personal experiences, popular trends—was measured against the creeds. Great and small allied themselves by the creeds. They were as well known as the national anthem, as popular as the nursery rhymes we teach our children.

Today, creeds are not exactly newsworthy. They are not hot topics; they do not qualify as news-breaking developments in the religious world. Adults yawn as they recite them in the liturgy. Children fidget, welcoming only the opportunity to stand up. The average layperson probably never thinks of weighing contemporary popular spirituality against the creeds.

The Anglican tradition does not require us to reject contemporary experience or insight when we turn to the creeds. Indeed, our Christian tradition invites us to examine all things by the light of scripture, and encourages us to keep our hearts open to all these sources of wisdom as we seek, in all things, to discern God's will for us, our Church and our world.

Yet often we are tempted to seek only one source of illumination: scripture, but not the lived experience of our Christian brothers and sisters; or contemporary insight, but not the hard-won insights of generations of our spiritual mothers and fathers. What do the creeds of old have to offer us in our search and struggle today?

Hearing the Creeds Today

The diminished popularity of Christian creeds, for which many gave their lives, is, in part, a result of the great popularity of other words. Contemporary attitudes, when they are not balanced with awareness and detachment, can lead us to reject unthinkingly the wisdom of the Church's creeds.

More than ever, we prize autonomy: "Don't tell me what to believe!" The creeds argue for a well-chosen openness to scripture, to the tradition of the Church and to the vision and fellowship of those who have gone before.

More than ever, people today prize skepticism: "Who can say what is really true?" Pilate embodies that attitude when he confronts Jesus' claim that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:38). The creeds argue for truth—not blind adherence to an unknowable truth, but fidelity to truth that can be tested in the life of the individual, in the experience of the Church.

We may be uncomfortable with language about spiritual matters, especially with language about the resurrection of Christ, the central mystery of our faith. Yet matters that cause us discomfort are precisely the matters where the Church invites us to struggle and grow. And the creeds offer us the companionship of centuries of believers in that struggle.

We prize spiritual lethargy: “The Christian life is too hard!” Even John Mark, one of the first missionaries of the Church, struggled with the sacrificial demands of the gospel (Acts 15:38). As G. K. Chesterton once said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” The creeds argue for energy: concentrated, relentless energy expended on the kingdom of God.

We prize self-rejection: “What I believe doesn’t matter; it won’t make any difference in the long run.” Judas Iscariot fell prey to this despair when he finally decided his own relationship with Jesus would never count for anything (Matthew 27:3-5). The creeds argue for the intrinsic worth of every human being: every person’s faith, every person’s decision, counts.

Where Did We Get the Creeds?

Many might find it surprising to learn that creeds were not written by a group of bishops a long time ago. The creeds were written by the Church, for the Church, within the Church. The occasions of their recording can be specifically traced, but the essence of each of the major creeds arose out of the “creedal store of the Church.” Writing the creeds served as a bridge between the belief and expression of the Church in life and worship and their acceptance by the faithful as reliable summaries of that life and worship.



Scripture emphasizes the significance of creeds, simple statements that reflect and affirm key events when God revealed and acted in history. The creeds demonstrate that the Christian religion is not primarily a religion of theology but a religion of history.

The Christian creeds, like scriptural ones, recite and rejoice over the work of God among humans. You can read simple scriptural creeds in Exodus 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 6:4; Acts 8:36-38; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 15:3-7; and 1 Timothy 3:16.)

For many years, the Christian creeds were unadorned baptismal affirmations that verified the catechumen's common faith with other believers, or hymns that praised God's work in Christ. But when basic beliefs in the Church were reinterpreted and challenged by theologians or politicians, the leaders of the Church gathered the faith as lived and taught within the Church and sought to express that faith with clarity and discernment.

The word *creed* comes from the Latin word, *credo*, which means "I believe." However, this belief was not primarily understood as a matter of intellectual assent. The etymological roots of the word *credere* are similar to those for the word heart. Another way to translate *credo* would be: "I set my heart..." The creed does not summarize how we make up our minds, but where we set our hearts.

Which Creeds?

The Apostles' Creed

Legend tells us that this Creed was composed by the 12 apostles (including Matthias) 10 days after the Ascension, each apostle contributing one line or phrase. While this is highly unlikely, it is true that each article of this Creed has been traced to other theological statements of around CE 100. Articles from this Creed were definitely in use, in an interrogatory form, by around CE 215.

This Creed, accepted in all Western churches, is the basis of the Baptismal Covenant in *the Book of Common Prayer* (p. 304), which poses the Creed in a question and answer format.

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed arose out of uncertainty over terms defining the Trinity. This search for greater clarity led to a series of controversies that culminated with the Council of Nicaea in 325. At the time, a teaching called Arianism was extremely popular in certain parts of the Church but it conflicted with the faith as most understood it.

Arius had proposed that, while Jesus was a great man and messenger of God, he was God's first creature, not divine. The leaders of the Church, both of the East and the West, gathered to debate the issue. Saints Ambrose (339–397) and Hilary (315–368) struggled mightily against the Arian heresy. The Church leaders came to affirm the Church's teaching that Jesus was both divine and human, so that in him we come face to face with God.

Fifty years after the Council of Nicaea, at the Council of Constantinople, the leaders of the Church added to their preliminary creed and formulated the Creed of 150 Fathers or the Constantinopolitan Creed or, as we now more often refer to it, the Nicene Creed. This Creed has been accepted by Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches around the world and throughout

history. Vincent of Lerins called the Creed “that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.” Episcopalians recite it regularly in liturgy, affirming their unity with the “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” (BCP, p. 358).

Definition of Chalcedon (451)

Because of its heavier, more complex statements, the “Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ” (BCP, p. 864) is less well known. Nevertheless, it serves to clarify orthodox Christology, that is, what the Church believes and teaches about Jesus Christ, who is both “truly God and truly man.”



The Creed of St. Athanasius (c. 500)

This Creed, also less familiar to many, explores the mystery of the Trinity. While it recognizes the problems that the human mind confronts when speaking of One God in Three Persons, this Creed proclaims that “we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, or dividing the Substance” (BCP, p. 864).

So What Is the Value of Creeds?

The creeds provide a unique expression of faith that serves a variety of purposes. Each function is vital to the life of the Church, facilitating its healthy growth and its work in the world.

The creeds express our confidence. They give voice to the core of faith that insists that God, who created all things, holds all things in love and will bring all things to fulfillment in the fullness of time. And in this in-between-time, we live in the heart of God through Christ.

The creeds express our worship. The remembrance of God’s work in history, God’s acts of salvation that culminate in Jesus Christ, is a part of worship. Scripture is full of creedal formulas that recall God’s faithfulness and lead us into praise. The creeds express our unity. As we all gather to focus on the truths about God who works through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, we spiritually join together, recognizing our oneness in calling and faith.

The creeds express our understanding of the Christian vision. Thomas Howard has called the orthodoxy that is verbalized in the creeds the “touchstone” or “the fixed standard” that helps us

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“learn the discipline of discrimination.” The pattern of truth laid out in the creeds sets us on a course that can lead us through the confusion of an age that values pluralism above all.

The great gift of our time is an insistence that the voices of many who have been marginalized must now be heard. The great gift of the creeds is that they bring to us the voices of those who have gone before us. It is for us to open our hearts and ears fully, to the needs of our own times and to the creeds of all times.