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The Apostles' Creed.

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A CREED as old as the Old-Roman Creed, which is only removed by one or two generations from the Apostolic age, and which has become either directly or indirectly the root of all the other Creeds, claims at our hands that we should carefully endeavour to ascertain both its original meaning, whether in general or in detail, and also its relation to the earliest preaching of the Gospel. Even if, according to the universally recognized principles of the Protestant Church, we cannot impute to it any independent authority, and still less an infallible one, and even if, in spite of its great antiquity, it dates from a period which gave birth to much that the Church of the Reformation has rejected, nevertheless the question, "What was actually professed and stated in the Creed?" deserves the closest investigation.

The Creed is the baptismal formula enlarged; a true understanding of it must start from this point. Accordingly, it is in three parts, like its prototype. The splitting up into twelve sections is manifestly a device of later times, in conflict with the whole drift of the Creed. The expansion was so contrived as to describe more closely the three members of the baptismal formula—"Father, Son and Holy Ghost." The Christian community felt the need of defining them so as to confess before all men what she possessed in them, and through her faith in them.

Perfect testimony to the faith of the Church, and one which no other expression could replace, is contained in the words of the first clause, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty." The author of the Creed did not probably attribute to the word Father the meaning that we are His children—a meaning which the early Church soon lost sight of. It was the Father of the Universe, and, therefore, the Creator alone, who was probably thought of. Still nothing stands in the way of construing Father in the paternal sense.

Equally simple and strong, evangelical and apostolic, is the amplification of the second clause, "Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord." Still, we require an explanation of the term "only Son." After Nicæa these words came to be unanimously believed by the Church to refer to the prehistoric and eternal Sonship of Christ, and every other interpretation was regarded as heretical. So Luther also interprets them. Yet to transfer this conception to the Creed is to transform it. It cannot be proved that, about the middle of the second century, the idea "only Son" was understood in this sense; on the contrary, the evidence of history conclusively shows that it was not so understood. Whoever, therefore, insists on finding the idea of "eternal Sonship" in the Old-Roman Creed, reads into it a meaning other than it originally bore.

The Creed was not content to bear witness to Christ as the "only Son our Lord," but added five (or six!) sentences, viz., "Who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate; on the third day He arose again from the dead; ascended into Heaven, and seated Himself at the right hand of the Father, whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

These statements coincide in the main with the original preaching of the Gospel. Nevertheless, two of the statements are not in entire agreement with it. One of the best established results of history is, that the clause "born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary" does not belong to the earliest Gospel preaching. This clause is an innovation, which of itself proves that the Creed does not belong to the earliest time any more than the Gospels of Matthew and Luke represent the earliest stage of evangelical history. There is another deviation in the Old Roman Creed from the oldest teaching, which is not so important, but which ought not to be overlooked, in spite of the difficulty of an exact appreciation—I mean the special prominence given to the Ascension. In the primitive tradition the Ascension had no separate place.

In the third fact of the baptismal formula, "I believe in the Holy Ghost," is supplemented not by way of personal addition like the first two, but by way of material addition—by the three items, "the Holy Church, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the flesh." It looks, therefore, as though the writer of the Creed did not conceive the Holy Ghost as a Person, but as a Power and Gift. This is, indeed, literally the case. No proof can be shown that about the middle of the second century, the Holy Ghost was believed in as a person. This conception, on the contrary, is one of much later date, which was still unknown to most Christians by the middle of the fourth century. Thenceforward in connection with Nicene orthodoxy, it made good its footing in the Church. It sprang from the scientific Greek theology of the day; for it cannot be shown that the (real or apparent) personification of the Holy Ghost in John's Gospel influenced the matter. Whoever, therefore, introduced the doctrine of the Three Persons of the Godhead into the Creed, explains it contrary to its original meaning and alters its true sense. Such an alteration was, of course, demanded from all Christians, from the end of the fourth century onwards, if they did not wish to expose themselves to the charge of heresy and its penalties.

In the Creed the Holy Ghost is conceived of as a gift, but as a gift by which the Divine life is offered to the believer; for the Spirit of God is God Himself. (In this sense there was never any doubt concerning the personal nature of the Spirit.) Three goods, or blessings, are added—which, however, are only developments of the one gift—and here the Creed gives full and faithful expression of the Apostolic teaching. They are "Holy Church," "Forgiveness of Sins," and "Resurrection of the Flesh." Nevertheless, it is certain that the form of the last clause is neither Pauline nor Johannine. In her conception of the resurrection and the life everlasting as the "resurrection of the flesh," the post-Apostolic Church over-stepped the line commonly observed in the oldest preaching. When the Church had to enter the lists against Gnosticism, she insisted upon the bodily resurrection, so as not to lose the resurrection altogether. However comprehensible this may be (and in the conflicts of those days no other formula would seem to have sufficed), the recognition of the fact that the Church was at the moment in a position of great need, does not make the formula itself legitimate.