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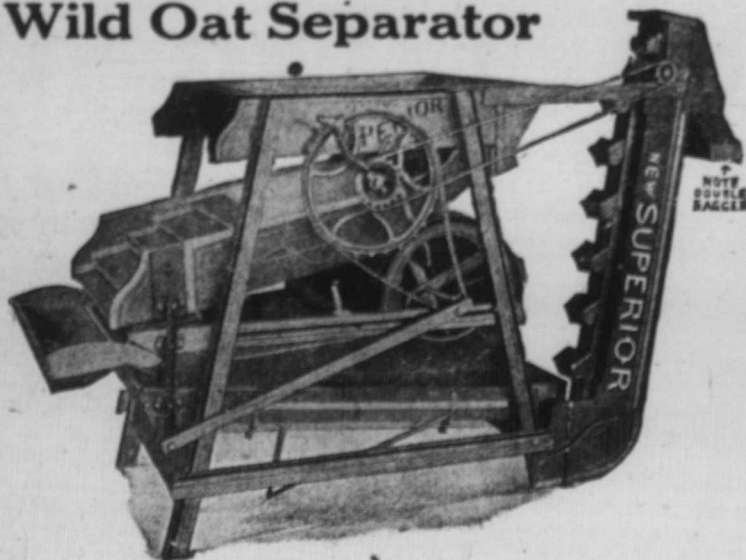
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# The Deeper Life

The Unchanging Creed of the Christian Church

By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

Resuming the discussion on creeds, we may repeat that it cannot be seen too clearly, first, that since Christianity is essentially a religion of freedom, no creed, however true, can ask belief except as it can show itself intrinsically believable. The Christian salvation is not in doing the right, but in seeing and loving the rightness of the right. And, second, that a creed is just a working hypothesis, a theory to be accepted till, if ever, a more satisfactory one is discovered. Christian doctrine has no resemblance to the petrified forest of Arizona. It is a living tree putting forth new leaves and branches every summer. It is also to be as clearly recognized that there is a deep instinct in the soul which seeks to anchor itself to the abiding. Even the sea-birds that are seen sporting amid the foaming billows of the mid-Atlantic, have somewhere a nest. If Christianity is the absolute and ultimate religion, it must not only give free play to the ever growing thought of man, but it must provide a resting place, a home for that spirit which in all its ceaseless activity deeply desires rest.

What is the unchanging element in the Christian creed, the element without which the creed and the life would cease to be Christian? Perhaps the best way to discover this is simply to compare the different creeds of the different Christian sects and of the passing Christian centuries and strike out everything we do not find in all. If we so strike out everything that is held by Roman Catholics only, by Anglicans only, by Presbyterians, Methodists or Baptists only, perhaps there will be left the real, essential and unchangeable Christian creed, as far at least as nearly nineteen centuries have shown us what Christianity is. We shall find what St. Vincent of Lerins, in A.D. 434, defined as the creed of the true Church: "What has been everywhere, always, and by all believed," and when we have endeavored to thus reduce the Christian creed to its simplest elements we shall find, I venture to think, that the one and only absolutely distinctive and essential and unchanging belief of the Christian Church is the lordship of Jesus. That is the one belief that is common to all Christians, the one belief which we are entitled to regard as unchanging in a world of change. This belief is the essential and unchanging element in the Christian creed, because it is the intellectual expression of the Christian spirit. Where Jesus Christ is acknowledged as lord and master there is Christianity. Where Jesus Christ is not acknowledged as lord and master the Christian spirit does not exist except in those exceptional cases which disregard all law.

That is the only creed, then, that can be used as a touchstone of character. The Christian churches would be, I think, justified in denying membership to anyone refusing assent to that creed. They would not be justified in refusing admission to anyone confessing such a creed whose life was not flagrantly at variance with his words, no matter what his other opinions were.

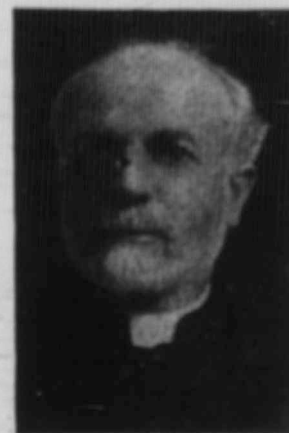
The lordship of Jesus is what may be called the irreducible minimum of the Christian creed; the one creed absolutely bound up with the Christian life. That belief, accordingly, it would seem to follow, is the only creedal requirement the churches are warranted in maintaining as a condition of membership. On any larger doctrinal requirements they are in danger of refusing some whom their Master would accept, and a church that excludes any

whom Christ receives ceases thereby to be a church of Christ. It sinks into a mere human society or club.

Societies may make such conditions of membership as they please. The church of Christ possesses no such powers. She must be open to all disciples as far as discipleship can be discerned by men. Her one question, then, to all seeking admission must be, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord? This is a belief which will prompt explanation, and explanations will vary. Every believer has the right to make his own explanation and to commend his explanation to his fellow disciples. No individual believer, nor any group of believers, however large or imposing, has the right to impose his or their explanation on others. There should be a large place in the church for teaching and for discussion.

There should be no place for dogmatism. It gives me pleasure to cite here a noble passage from the *magnus opus* of the late and deeply lamented Dr. Denny: "What Christ claims and what is His due is a place in the faith of men—in other words it is an attitude of the soul to himself as He is presented in the gospels—to be true Christians we are thus bound to Him but we are not bound to anything else. . . . We are not bound to any man's or any church's rendering of what He is or has done. We are not bound to any Christology or to any doctrine of the work of Christ. No intellectual construction of what Christ's presence and work in the church mean is to be imposed beforehand as a law upon faith or a condition of membership in the church. It is faith which makes a Christian, and when the Christian attitude of the soul to Christ is found it must be free to raise its own problems and to work out its own solutions. This is the point at which "broad" churchism is in the right against an evangelical christianity which has not learned to distinguish between its faith—in which it is unassailable—and inherited forms of doctrine which have been unreflectingly identified with it. Natural as such identification may be, and painful as it may be to separate in thought things which have coalesced in strong and sacred feelings, there is nothing more certain than that the distinction must be recognized if evangelical Christians are to maintain their intellectual integrity and to preach the gospel in a world which is intellectually free. We are bound to Christ and we would see all men so bound, but we must leave it to Christ to establish His ascendancy over men in His own way by the power of what He is and what He has done—and not seek to secure it beforehand by the imposition of chains of our own forging." (Jesus and the Gospel, pp. 382-3.)

Dr. Denny's suggestion as this irreducible minimum of creed is, "I believe in God through Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord and Saviour." But the creed of the primitive church was shorter even than that. Jesus imposed as conditions of discipleship only that a man should deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him. Face to face with the distressed and penitent jailer at Philippi, apparently a raw heathen, Paul answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" seems to have been the earliest, and we may well believe will be the ultimate creed, the only authoritative creed of a church that, as at the outset, but in a far deeper and richer sense, will be human and universal, in the truest meaning of the venerable term, Catholic.



Dr. BLAND