

Introduction - The Creeds

Dean O. Wenthe, M.A., M.Div., Th.M., Ph.D.
Professor, Exegetical Theology—President

"Deeds not creeds!" has periodically become the cry of some in the Christian community. This formula expresses the American conviction that what produces results is to be endorsed and embraced. Pragmatism is in the very air we breathe.

But what might be an appropriate admonition for those building a road is questionable for those who seek to build the church. Prominent pulpits have been filled by pastors who have marketed Jesus of Nazareth as the One who came to make us ever more efficient and successful. With considerable skill, the listener or viewer is taken on an emotional ride which precisely parallels what our society regards as suitable religious sentiments.

In such a setting, the act of confessing the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian creeds seems inefficient and even counter-productive. At the center of the question of whether creeds enhance or detract from Christian life is the foundational issue of God's very character. The creeds were forged in the crucible of debates about God's very being. Great minds wrestled with how to confess the Triune God of Sacred Scripture faithfully and fully. It was very clear that Athanasius' portrait of the God of Sacred Scripture was discreet and distinct from the God whom Arius portrayed, though he also appealed to Scriptural texts.

The question of the character of the true God is simply too crucial to be ignored. Our very destiny depends on knowing the true God. As the Athanasian Creed puts it, "This is the catholic faith which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved." Thinking about the truth gave birth to the creeds. The church today needs not simply to do or to feel, it desperately needs to think more clearly. Ralph C. Wood, University Professor at Baylor, has urged, "A healthy dose of Christian 'holy skepticism' would serve as a much-needed antidote to the soft-core spirituality that saps much of contemporary Christianity, especially in its evangelical expression. An anti-doctrinal sentimentality often rules the worship and the art of our churches, where self-serving emotions are exalted over true mystery. The church of our time needs a theology that repudiates all saccharine substitutes for the hard thinking the Christian faith requires."

As you reflect, think about the fidelity and fullness of these confessions of the Holy Trinity. The wonderful service which they eloquently and yet simply perform is to describe God's character rightly. The story of salvation is the engaging truth of Three Persons in the one Godhead revealed in their actions in the story of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth. "To confess," rightly and historically understood, is not simply to affirm truthfulness or endorse an abstract set of data. To confess the creedal faith is to worship. To confess is to define one's whole life out of the presence and reality of the God therein described. To confess the Holy Trinity is to affirm our baptismal identity. To confess the Holy Trinity is to receive holy absolution. To confess the Holy Trinity is to share in God's life.

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