

Credo: I Believe

By
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April 2007

We are a creedal church. We accept the three ancient ecumenical Creeds as brief and true statements of the doctrines of the Word of God. The creeds are authoritative not on their own account; nor because they are church traditions; and certainly not because some person or church body says so, but rather because the one, holy, universal and apostolic church says so. The creedal statements are a form of *paradosis*, the handing on of the teaching of scripture. By this we mean that the creeds are authoritative summaries of scriptural teaching. In the Creeds, the faith once delivered to the saints is handed over to us, that we might proclaim the Gospel to our generation and hand it over to succeeding generations.

Luke writes of this process of "handing on" the Word of God to His People: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as *they delivered [paradidomi] them unto us*" (Luke 1:1-2a). The apostle Paul continues this thought: "For I have received of the Lord *that which also I delivered [paradidomi] unto you...*" (1 Cor 11:23); and again, "For *I delivered [paradidomi] unto you* first of all that which I also received..." (1 Cor 15:3). Paul wrote to Timothy: "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same *commit [paratithemi] thou* to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2).

Regarding tradition (so-called), the apostle Paul writes: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions *[paradosis]* which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (2 Thes 2:15). The simplistic way the KJV translates this word doesn't do it justice. This *paradosis* is the substance of the apostolic teaching, as the remainder of the verse makes clear. The passing on of the apostolic teachings, as contained in the scriptures, is done through the church. We understand this from the context (2 Thes 2:13-14), from which is derived Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed: "But the Holy Spirit call me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as He calls, gathers together, enlightens and makes holy the whole Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus in the one, true faith" (SC II, 6).

In this manner the church of the reformation confessed the scriptures alone as the sole source of authority, and confessed the ecumenical creeds as passing on the doctrines of scripture to succeeding generations. The *sola scriptura* was confessed over against Rome and its three sources of authority: scripture, tradition, and the living magisterium as the supreme authority in the teaching church (whose teachings are infallible when blessed by the Pope). When the reformers confessed that scripture alone was authoritative, they did not imply that the authoritative interpretation of scripture was given directly to each individual by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20). This cannot be the case, for each congregation calls its pastor to the public proclamation of the Word, by which we mean the public proclamation of the Gospel. Thus the pastor proclaims the incarnate Word, in the place of Christ, and for the public benefit of all.

Jude writes of the "common salvation" and of the "faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). From this it is clear that the common salvation is not a private matter between me and Jesus.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit doesn't speak authoritatively through the individual to the church. No proclamation of scripture is of any private interpretation, as says the Apostle Peter: No proclamation of scripture comes by the will of man, but men of God (pastors) speak the Word of God (proclamation) in the words of God (scripture) by means of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20).

Moreover, no prophet prophesied alone, but always prophesied within a prophetic context. There is considerable overlap between the writing prophets, such that various prophets may have known each other and instructed each other. The Old Testament describes the "company of the prophets" (1 Sam 19:20), and the so-called "sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 2:3). We might describe these as a school of prophets, a society of prophets, or even as a ministerium.

The Holy Spirit speaks to us today not through the witness of any individual prophet, but through the prophets (Mat 2:23). Jesus himself said, "I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes" (23:34). These prophets of God had a consistent message, proclaiming the Words of scripture within an instructional and ministerial context, and with the understanding that they were only one of many prophets of God. This, then, is the meaning of the phrase in the Revelation of St. John, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev 2: 7).

The Church speaks in her Creeds. The Athanasian Creed opens by saying that "Whosoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith". Another way of saying it is that you can be more sure of your salvation when you hold to the true Christian doctrine. The apostle Peter says much the same thing when he tells us to "make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet 1:10). We do this by adhering to the "sure word of prophecy (2 Pet 1:19). Paul said much the same regarding elders whose qualification was that they were "holding fast the faithful word" (Tit 1:9). By contrast, Paul describes those who "will not endure sound doctrine" and who "turn away their ears away from the truth" (2 Tim 4:3-4). The Athanasian Creed is therefore, by means of the teaching of scripture, calling each of us who have been called by the Gospel to confess the true Christian faith, while recognizing that some will reject this teaching and thereby deny their faith.

The Athanasian Creed closes by saying that the truths just confessed are "the true Christian faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved." This clause in particular is troubling, and sounds harsh to our modern ear. Remembering our discussion of the introduction to the Athanasian Creed, we ask the question from the Small Catechism: "What does this mean?" In the abstract, false doctrine is damnable, being contrary to the faith. But if we confess a contrary doctrine not willfully, but out of ignorance, we also know that God is merciful, not willing that any perish, but that all come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). Moreover, although we can be certain of what the Athanasian Creed says in the damnatory clauses, we cannot see into a person's heart, and we cannot read the names written in the Lamb's book of life. God alone knows those whom that belong to him (2 Tim 2:19). We therefore confess in the abstract that certain doctrines are damnable and contrary to the Faith, but this does not presume to bind God's ability to give the gift of saving faith through the Holy Spirit to whomsoever He wills.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ.