

DO WE NEED MORE THAN 'SCRIPTURE ALONE'?

A PROPOSAL FOR THE RE-INTRODUCTION

OF CREEDS INTO THE LITURGY OF

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

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Since Luther's stand at Worms, *sola scripturi* has become a standard dictum within Protestantism. Especially within Evangelicalism, it is considered beyond question that Scriptures must always triumph over tradition, even to the point of obliteration. Thus, the terms "contrary to Scriptures," "extra-Scriptural," and "Scriptural," are generally understood to mean heretical, questionable, and orthodox, respectively. Further, since every Christian is a "priest," by virtue of the indwelling of the "Spirit of Truth," it should follow that the authority of any individual Christian may stand against the most adamantly held and preached dogmas of the church, so long as they have a Scriptural backing. Finally, it is particularly true that in North American Evangelical education Christians are taught to question and evaluate all theological information against Scriptures, as the noble Bereans did.

Thus, the ideal Evangelical picture of a theologian is that of an independent individual leaning carefully and intently over a tattered copy of the Bible, with a minimalist stack of concordances and study-helps on the desk beside him/her, and a rather small shelf full of theological/dogmatic resources gathering dust somewhere in the periphery, if present at all.

While admitting the value of personal Bible study, this author believes that there are serious dangers to endorsing such "Biblicist" theology.

First, it may lead to theological immaturity. Like a math or science curriculum which removes the multiplication or periodic tables, a theology bereft of tradition forces each successive generation into a sort of dark-ages of theology, where they are doomed into "laying again [and again and again] a foundation," rather than, "pressing on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1). More seriously, a very dangerous agnosticism may begin to pervade

on the essentials of the faith. After all, two people may leave a passage with two very different readings. Who is to say that one is right and the other wrong? And if there is no clear winner in the Calvin vs. Arminius debate, who is to say that Athanasius has really triumphed over Arius?

Ironically, the Biblicist model also leads at times to extreme dogmatism and inflexibility, as various denominations and scholars appeal to “correct” hermeneutical procedures, with the end result that their traditions become untouchable, since they are “Founded on the Word of God!” While Biblicism is often tempered by common sense and an invisible theological tradition, there are virtually no mechanisms for opposing extremism, schism and heresy when they take advantage of the fertile soil of Biblicism.

In sum, then, the Biblicist assumption that Scriptures themselves are in violent opposition to theology and tradition – bucking and kicking against it whenever any such “man-made” (and thus spurious) confinements are placed upon it – is ultimately quite dangerous. While carefully maintaining that there is a grave danger in an over-emphasis on tradition, an over-emphasis on the Bible holds serious dangers of its own.

As the safest pathway between the “Charybdis” of Biblicism and the “Scylla” of traditionalism,¹ a return to the ancient creeds may be the safest middle-ground for sound teaching, since it has obvious benefits, as well as being in keeping with the Apostolic intention, as seen in the New Testament (NT) canon.

Thus, the Evangelical church should return to the ancient practice of using creeds to define the essentials of the faith, while still employing *soli scripturi* for other doctrines.

¹ This illustration from the title of Rev. G. Tyrrell’s, *Scylla and Charybdis*, quoted in, Hugh T. Pope, *The Rule of Faith*, transcribed by Bob Elder, The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume V, (New York, NY; Robert Appleton Co.) [article on-line] available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05766b.htm>, Internet, accessed, 17 Dec. 2007.

ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

Like virtually every religion, Christianity claims to have a means of ascending towards God. Unlike other religions, however, Jesus' pathway of ascension was not solely through right *knowledge* or right *actions* alone, nor of a combination of both. Rather, Jesus' "gospel of the kingdom" (Mat 4:23, 9:35, etc.) consisted in the message that entrance (or "re-birth" John 3:3) into the kingdom of God was possible through a right *relationship* with God through communion with Jesus, who Himself is the "door for the sheep"² (John 10:7), the stem of the vine (John 15:1-12), the head of the body (Col. 1:18) and the only source of life and nourishment (John 6:53).

This does not mean, however, that Christianity is entirely about a nebulous, "warm-and-fuzzy" spiritual relationship to Jesus. Rather, right knowledge and right action follow closely behind the actual relationship which one has with Christ, to instruct, define and correct it.

To illustrate this interplay, we may consider the relationship which individuals have with certain departed icons, such as Martin Luther, or Elvis. While one may feel that they really "know" these individuals on an emotional level by participating in their causes or art, there is a significant possibility that they may read their own aspirations, idealizations and agendas into the relationship. Thus, for each of these people there is a core of facts which are indispensable. If someone imagined, for example, that they really

² *Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures from The Lockman Foundation, The New American Standard Bible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corp., 1999).*

knew Luther apart from his faith, or Elvis apart from his music, it could easily be concluded that they are not relating to real but imaginary peoples.

This reality is also tragically illustrated by the on-line dating phenomenon. Deprived of essential facts, many believe that they have fallen in love with the person of their dreams, only to find upon meeting that their “loved one” was really a figment of their imagination, and the person before them is a stranger.

Thus, since the Christian faith is really about a relationship, Paul explains that some amount of right knowledge is essential as a prerequisite for salvation since it would not be possible to “believe in Him whom they have not heard” (Rom. 10:14). Likewise, some amount of right action is necessary as a sort of “postrequisite,” since Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15) and “you will know them by their fruits” (Mat. 7:16, 20). An actual relationship with Jesus transcends both knowledge and actions in the crucified and risen Lord (1 Cor. 2:1-5), through whom we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Right knowledge and action however (which we could collectively call “right doctrine”) necessarily follow closely behind this relationship in the actual practice of the church, and in the NT (1 Tim. 3:16).

Inherent within this schema is a hierarchy or dichotomy of doctrines, where some (which relate to the essential nature of the Christian’s understanding of and relationship to God) are of paramount importance, and some (which relate to other matters of the faith) are of lesser, and even trivial importance. There is, in other words, a sort of “core” of doctrine which should be differentiated from the other doctrines of the church.

This dichotomy is strongly demonstrated in the writings of the NT. In the Pastorals, for example, Paul instructs Timothy, “not to wrangle about words,” (2 Tim.

2:14) and to “have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women” (1 Tim. 4:7) or with “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:4). Likewise, he mandates that ample room be afforded to both the “strong” and the “weak” in the faith, to worship God with the rituals, abstinences, rites, regulations, etc. that their own conscience dictated to them (Rom. 14:5f, 1 Cor. 10:28f). To the ears of their contemporaries, this aspect of the Apostles’ message seems to have sounded anti-intellectualistic and libertarian, which created a barrier for both Jews and Greeks/Gentiles (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:23). For issues which the Apostles considered more significant, however, there was no such laxity.

The Apostles reserved their most vitriolically epithets for those they considered doctrinal opponents, dubbing them “false teachers/prophets” (2 Tim. 4:3, 2 Pet. 2:1/Mat. 7:5, 24:11, 1 John 4:1, etc.), “antichrists” (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3, 2 John 1:7), “dogs” (Phil. 3:2), “savage wolves” (Acts 20:29), “creatures of instinct to be captured and killed” (2 Pet. 2:12), etc.³ Paul calls down a double-curse on those who preach a gospel other than his (Gal. 1:8-9), and even stoops so low as to say that certain of his opponents should emasculate themselves (Gal. 5:12). John is clear that anyone who does not bear Apostolic teaching should be shunned from Christian community and deprived of lodging and even cordial greetings (2 John 1:10).

This harsh intolerance for some deviations stands in bold relief against the apparent indifference with which the Apostles regarded certain other matters. At least one author resolves this difficulty by concluding that the Apostles were motivated by their

³ See also Jude 1:5-18 and 2 Pet. 2.

own “fiercely exclusive”⁴ egomania, and were selfishly unable to tolerate differences of opinion. In light of the Scriptural witness, however, it seems more likely that the Apostles were very aware that “tolerance is not an ultimate virtue,”⁵ but at times a grave offense (cf. Ezek. 33:1-20), since error on the fundamental nature of God and grace is really the most rending of tragedies (Rom. 9:2f).

Assumed throughout the NT is the idea of a battle which “is not against flesh and blood,” (Eph 6:12) but between God, the angels, Christians (the ‘forces of light’) and Satan, demons, ‘the flesh,’ sin, deceived Christians and sinners (the ‘forces of darkness’)⁶. Thus, while Paul prescribes patience and kindness for those who are “in opposition” (2 Tim. 2:24), there is no hint of toleration for teaching which will result in the Apostles losing what they have accomplished (2 John 1:8), allowing many to suffer “loss” (2 Cor. 7:9), or leading of a teacher or a pupil towards “shipwreck in regard to their faith” (1 Tim. 1:9). Rather, since these teachers are in “the snare of the devil” and are thus “held captive to him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25), all efforts must be made to stop the propagation of these “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1) before their teaching spread.

For this reason, the Apostles placed a very strong emphasis on passing on a core of doctrinal “non-negotiables” to their churches. On this, Kelly writes,

In Jude 3 we read of ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’; later (verse 20) the author speaks of ‘your most holy faith’, again using the word in

⁴ R.E. Brown wrote on 2 John 1:10 that John was being “fiercely exclusive” and, considering the harsh treatment which John seems to have received between his second and third epistle, “In retrospect may have come to wonder whether it would not have been wiser to do unto his adversaries as he would have them do unto him.” R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, (New York, NY: Harper and Roe Publishing, 1946), 693.

⁵ Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: Letters of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 240.

⁶ Cf. 2 Cor. 6:14f, Eph. 5:8f, Rom. 13:11-14, etc.

the sense of an accepted body of beliefs. Similarly in the Pastoral Epistles such phrases as ‘model of sound words’ (2 Tim. 1, 13), ‘the healthy doctrine’ (2 Tim 4, 3; Tit. 1,9), ‘the deposit and ‘the noble deposit’ (1 Tim. 6, 20; 2 Tim. 1, 14), ‘the faith’ in its concrete acceptation (1 Tim. 1, 19, Tit. 1, 13), and ‘the splendid teaching’ (1 Tim. 4,6) form a constant refrain. The writer of *Hebrews*, too, is frequent in his allusions to ‘the confession’ to which he advises his readers to hold fast at whatever cost (3, 1; 4, 14; 10, 23).⁷

It is clear, then, that among the breadth of teaching which the Apostles passed on to the church, there was inherent within it an essential core, which they considered indispensable. While granting a remarkable amount of liberty outside of this core, they accepted no opposition to the core itself.

⁷ (1), *Early Christian Creeds*, (London, Eng; Longman, 1972), 9.

AN APOSTOLIC CREED

Traditionally, the pursuit for ancient support for modern Creeds has moved from current creeds backwards to simpler creeds,⁸ and ultimately to an ultimate, simple creed supposedly composed by the Apostles themselves. According to this schema, the “core” examined above was nothing other than a literal creed. Rufinus gives voice to this legend in saying that,

...so that they might not find themselves, widely separated as they would be, giving out different doctrines to the people they invited to believe in Christ, [the Apostles] met together in one spot, and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, compiled this brief token [a.k.a. the ‘Apostle’s Creed’]...of their future preaching, each making the contribution he thought fit; and they decreed that it should be handed out as a standard teaching to believers.”^{9 10}

While appealing, this notion has been “quietly set aside by practically all scholars”¹¹ since the time of the Reformation first because there are fundamental differences from the Apostle’s Creed and the remnants of the Old Roman creed, and also because this creed has never been used by the Eastern church.¹² Kelly attributes the

⁸ O. Sydney Barr, for example, traces the Apostles’ Creed back to the ‘Old Roman Creed,’ although he does not make the further step to the Apostles. O. Sydney Barr, *From the Apostle’s Faith to the Apostle’s Creed*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), 6.

⁹ Rufinus, as quoted in Kelly, 1-2.

¹⁰ Subsequent writers picturesquely elaborated this legend, attributing a line to each of the Twelve. E.g. “Peter said ‘I believe in God the father almighty...maker of heaven and earth’...and Andrew said ‘and in Jesus Christ His Son...our only Lord’...James said...[etc.],” from *De symbolo, as quoted in Kelly*, 3.

¹¹ Kelly, 5.

¹² These two objections pointed out by (2), *The Making of the Creeds*, (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), pp. 2-3.

mistaken hypothesis of an ancient Creed mostly to “an anachronistic reading-back of subsequent practice into the life of the early Church,”¹³ as well as “a particular example of the recognized tendency of the early Church to attribute the whole of its doctrinal, liturgical and hierarchical apparatus to the Twelve and, through them, to our Lord.”¹⁴

A second, equally mistaken hypothesis is that the Apostles really had no “core” of doctrine until external pressures (primarily from the Docetic and Arian controversies, and political pressure) forced a more sacrosanct theology upon the church, sometime in the second and third centuries. This opinion was especially popular around the turn of the century by scholars like Harnack, who, according to Kelly, were “mesmerized by the evolutionary axiom that the less complex must always precede the more complex, and that there must be a line of progressive development.”¹⁵ Aside from the dangers inherent in forcing history into *any* pre-conceived model (especially one as suspect as evolution!), this approach is questionable on whole because it ignores the actual presence of a core of non-negotiables within the Apostolic church.

Further, there is compelling evidence first that this core was already beginning to solidify into a discernable creed during the Apostolic era, and, secondly, that the impetus for this transition came from within, not without.

While the Apostolic church did not have a creed per se, Young contends that “From the very beginning, the Christian communities developed a stereotyped ‘in-language’ to summarize their fundamental teaching or tell their particular story.”¹⁶ Very

¹³ Kelly, 24.

¹⁴ Kelly, 5.

¹⁵ Kelly, 27.

¹⁶ Young, 7.

early in the Apostolic age, this in-language began to crystallize into distinctive catch-phrases which were considered emblematic of the larger body of belief which they represented.

Probably the most basic test of orthodoxy was found in the simple statement “Jesus is Lord” (or something like it), which “expressed the beliefs of Christians in epitome.”¹⁷ This is especially expressed in the writings of Paul and John, where it becomes a litmus-tests for orthodoxy.¹⁸ Further to this test, Kelly also identifies what he terms “two-membered confessions” (those concerned with the Father and the Son) and “three-membered confessions” (those which are concerned with the Father, Son and Spirit) throughout the NT.

A poignant example of a two-membered confession is, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” – a phrase which is repeated verbatim¹⁹ and with minor adaptations²⁰ as a standard introduction and refrain throughout Paul’s epistles, and with subtle variations throughout the catholic epistles.²¹ Doubtless the best-known example of a three-membered confession is Matthew 28:19, while Galatians 4:6, Ephesians 1:17, are also significant.

Even more tellingly, there are several longer passages in the NT which strongly demonstrate the propensity of the Apostolic church to enunciate their faith in creed-like fashion. Similar passages include Romans 1:3f, 8:34, and 1 Timothy 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:8.

¹⁷ Kelly, 25.

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 12:3f, 1 John 4:3f

¹⁹ Rom. 1:7; 1Cor. 1:3; 2Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:2; Phi. 1:2; Philm. 1:3

²⁰ Rom. 15:6, Gal. 1:3, Col. 1:3, 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1, Eph. 6:23, 2 Thess. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:2, Tit. 1:4.

²¹ 1 Pet. 1:3, 1 John 1:3, 5:1, 2 John 1:3, Jude 1:1

In a like manner, some passages include a two-membered (1 Tim. 2:5f, 6:13, 2 Tim. 4:1) and three-membered (1 Pet. 3:18ff) confession, which come closer still to a creed-like formula.

After considering the data, Kelly firmly states, “that the Church in the apostolic age possessed a creed in the broad sense of a recognized body of teaching may be accepted as demonstrated fact.”²² Although enunciated differently by each of the Apostles, then, the core of faith which they preached was consistent throughout, and could be easily gleaned from their writings. In this sense, then, a later creed could be seen to have a link back to the Apostles if it may be demonstrated as representative of the ‘creed’ which they possessed and proclaimed.

²² Kelly, 13.

BUT AREN'T SCRIPTURES ENOUGH?

Since all cannot read the Scriptures, some being hindered from knowing them by lack of education, and others by want of leisure,... we comprise the whole doctrine of the faith in the few lines... it is not some human compilation, but consists of the most important point collected out of Scriptures.²³ – Cyril of Jerusalem

On consideration of this fairly standard *raison d'être* for the creeds, many Evangelicals may question whether this “collection” of the essentials – while technically possible, as explored above – is really necessary. Literacy is not, after all, a major obstacle in the twenty-first century, and laziness was probably never a viable excuse. Further, since Scriptures are after all are the perfectly inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16), some may feel that any “subsequent elucidations are not only unnecessary but misleading.”²⁴ After all, we know that “men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21) in the authoring of Scriptures, whereas there is no such assurance about the authoring of the creeds.

The real problem which leads to Evangelicals to this point is encapsulated well by Millard Erickson’s simplistic explanation for the authority of Scriptures: “God is the ultimate authority in religious matters...[and] he has delegated that authority by creating a book, the Bible.”²⁵ While this is technically true, the details which are glossed over in this statement are indispensable, and ultimately lead to a differing view of Holy Writ.

²³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical lectures*, V.12, *quoted in Kelly*, 5.

²⁴ David Willis, *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 4.

²⁵ (3;3;3)

A Trinitarian view of Scriptures does not envision a monolithic deity authoring Scriptures by banal fiat, but by the Word becoming incarnate, in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the one who both has the words of life (John 6:68) and who *is* the Word of Life (1 John 1:1). Whereas others need look to a greater authority on which to base their truth statements, there *is* no authority higher than God (Heb. 6:14). Thus, Jesus taught with His own authority (Mat. 7:21) as God himself (John 8:28, etc.), and His words alone are the firm rock on which to build (Mat. 7:24-27). All attempts to reach to God must pass through Him or fail (John 14:6).

Only a cursory reading of the New Testament shows, however, that none of the books of the Bible claim to be directly penned by Christ, nor does it seem that they were immediate transcriptions of Jesus' words and actions. Rather, He promised that He would send "the Spirit of truth" on His departure, who would testify about Himself, and also enable the disciples to testify "because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). Put simply, Jesus did not pass the mantle of His authority directly on to a corpus of writings, but (through the indwelling of the Spirit) to a group of living men – the Apostles. As Clement of Rome (A.D. 95) succinctly puts it,

The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent from God. The Christ therefore is from God and the Apostles from Christ. In both ways, then, they were in accordance with the appointed order of God's will.²⁶

That the NT derives its authority from God *by* Jesus Christ *through* the Holy Spirit *in* the Apostles is not really new information; really *seeing* the work of the Trinity behind the Canon, however, makes a world of difference in our view and treatment of it.

²⁶ Clement of Rome, to the Church at Corinth, 95 A.D., trans. Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb Library, ____, 134

Usually, when Biblicists discuss the authoring of Scriptures, a mental picture is painted which is far closer to the clean and monolithic legend of the Septuagint than the actual narrative of the stormy years between C50 A.D. and 367 A.D. Without a solid theology of the Spirit who “hovers over the [chaotic] waters” (Gen. 1:2), and ultimately brings life and order out of the chaos (Gen. 1:24, Psalm 104, 30), the true story of the canonization process would likely be unsettling to the Christian faith.²⁷

Rather, it could be said that ‘the Spirit strove with man’ (Gen. 6:3) by drawing the chosen to the Son (John 6:44), indwelling them (Eph. 1:13), gifting them (1 Cor. 12:4), appointing leadership (1 Cor. 12:28), etc., all with the ultimate goal of preparing the church, like “a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2), to present to Christ.

The result of this tumultuous striving is *anything* but the flat, monochrome textbook which would be expected of a monistic deity. Rather than weighting all Scriptures equally, the authors who were “born along by the Holy Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:21, LITV) seemed to sense His message “explicitly” (1 Tim. 4:1) over some topics, while He remains ambiguous on others (1 Cor. 7:40). Some are delivered “as of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3), while others are brushed over for reasons of time constraints (Heb. 9:5b) or the limitations of the recipients (John 16:12, Heb. 5:11). Some are “not according to man” but by direct revelation (Gal. 1:12), while others are based on personal opinion (1 Cor. 7:40, 2 Cor. 8:10) or left to the judgment of the recipients (1 Cor. 11:13).

In the midst of all of His leadings, the directives which come forth the clearest – which, as Paul says, are simply a “delivery” of the messaged “received” directly from

²⁷ It may be speculated, in fact, that Christians tend to gloss over this period – along with many other points in Church history – precisely because they espoused a theology which is too weak to support the weight of the historic workings of a Trinitarian God, in the midst of a broken and sinful people.

Christ (1 Cor. 11:23) – are those which concern the essential nature of God and our relationship to Him.

It appears that the Evangelical church – still swooning, perhaps, from the momentum of the Reformation – is nearly the only portion of Christendom which is embarrassed of this portion of their heritage.²⁸ The burden of proof, however, is in the Biblicist’s court. On what grounds may Scriptures be flattened, so that all passages are considered equal? On what grounds may the ancient practice of extracting and compiling the essentials of Christianity into creeds be abandoned and discouraged? On what grounds, in short, may the innovation of Biblicism stand against the ancient creeds, which stand securely within the message and intention of the Apostles themselves?

It seems, in fact, that the tragic consequence of the Evangelical church’s over-ambition to uphold Scriptures and to emulate the Apostolic church at any cost has led to a denial of the Scriptural and Apostolic pattern of using creeds to safeguard the essentials of the faith.

Thus, for the health of the Evangelical church – and also in simple obedience to the directions of the Holy Spirit – it is likely high time that the imbalance of Biblicism be balanced by a re-introduction of the creeds into the liturgy of the Evangelical church.

²⁸ Emilianos Imiadis, for example, writes that the creeds in general and the Nicene Creed in particular is, “generally accepted as providing a summary of our Christian faith.” Emilianos Imiadis, *The Nicene Creed: Our Common Faith*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 19.

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