

THE
HIBBERT
JOURNAL

Winter, 1966-7: p. 80

The Apostles' Creed

THERE IS AN ODD tradition that the Apostles' Creed was composed by the apostles themselves in the upper room at Pentecost, each of the twelve contributing one verse. This of course cannot be true, though for centuries it was the official teaching of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the earliest account of the creed, in something like its present form, goes no further back than the fourth century, though it must be older. Most histories describe how it gradually took shape, beginning in the New Testament itself, and becoming more and more explicit through the work of a succession of Christian thinkers.

This is however not the usual way in which creeds come into existence. Normally a creed or confession of faith is composed to meet some special needs, and is intended to define certain positions which are under attack; other important matters, not in dispute, are ignored. This is certainly the history of all the other creeds of which we have knowledge. It is at least possible that the Apostles' Creed, in much the form that it has today, was composed as a repudiation of Marcion, who founded his version of Christianity about 144 A.D. We know from Tertullian and others how dangerous to orthodoxy his beliefs were considered.

The name itself—"Apostles' Creed"—may be significant. Marcion followed Paul only, and taught (on Paul's authority) that the rest of the apostles had fallen back into Judaism. He accepted one gospel only, Luke's, and Luke was not himself an apostle. This one gospel and the major epistles of Paul formed the whole of Marcion's New Testament. In reply the Church made a New Testament of her own, including in it all the apostolic writings which could be recovered. Mark and Luke were included, not as apostles, but as "apostolic men" (in Tertullian's words), who wrote what they had learnt from the lips of apostles. Paul's letters still form a considerable proportion of the text of the New Testa-

The Apostles' Creed

ment; but his major letters are balanced by the pastoral epistles attributed to him (which make him more of a churchman, and less of an individualist, than one would gather from the major epistles), and they are supplemented by letters attributed to John, Peter, Jude and James, all apostles. An important book is the Acts of the Apostles, and the Revelation of John is included, not because it was in tune with second-century Christianity (which it was not), but because of its presumed apostolic authorship. The first official creed was therefore called, not the Christian Creed, but the Apostles' Creed, in answer to Marcion.

Marcion made a sharp distinction between the God who made the world, who was a god of mere arbitrary justice, and the God of Love, who sent his son to save men out of the world and to proclaim a higher life of gentleness and self-denial. The Apostles' Creed begins by a firm denial of this dualism: "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth". It continues: "and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord"—insisting, as Tertullian did, that Christ was the son of the same God of whom we learn in the Old Testament. The Creed then goes on to speak of the virgin birth of Christ, and his suffering under Pontius Pilate, and how he was "crucified, dead and buried" and rose again on the third day. Marcion in contrast taught that Jesus appeared as a grown man in Capernaum, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, and that, since he did not have a fleshly body, he was incapable of suffering.

The phrase "he descended into hell", which has caused so much controversy, since it has so little scriptural basis, also seems to refer to the teaching of Marcion, who apparently believed that Christ had done nothing for the righteous men of the Old Testament, who had died before his coming. The Church, in contrast, believed that Christ saved them also and brought them out of hell. The clause about Christ coming again to judge the quick and the dead also may be a repudiation of Marcion, who denied that Christ was a judge, and apparently believed that his work was completed at the crucifixion.

The Apostles' Creed

Marcion's teaching had no place for a holy Spirit; the Church, on the contrary, emphasised the Spirit as the guide and ruler of the Christian community, and the force of its sacraments—all this prior to any developed doctrine of the Trinity. Hence "I believe in the Holy Ghost"; and "the Holy Catholic Church", as against Marcion's sectarian following which claimed to be the authentic Christianity.

Even the clause about "the forgiveness of sins" may be anti-Marcion; for Marcion preached a loving God, who graciously accepted believing man, without that moral sifting which the orthodox Church believed necessary, and for which it made provision. "The resurrection of the body" is even more obviously a repudiation of Marcion, who taught that men must discard their bodies, only their souls being immortal. And is belief in "the life everlasting" a denial of some form of absorption into the divine at death, with loss of personal identity? Tertullian argues at length against Marcion that, since men will be re clothed in new fleshly bodies after death, they will continue to live as persons in heaven, and be subject to judgement.

If this is true, then reaction against Marcion led to both the New Testament canon and the Apostles' Creed. Marcion must have been an important person, hidden from us now because only the writings of his enemies have survived. Perhaps an attempt at a new estimate of him is needed. *Marcion and his influence*, by E. C. Blackman, hardly does him justice, since the author so completely accepts Tertullian's hostile account. Harnack thought Marcion was "the first Protestant", but that is hardly right; and Lietzmann's picture of him in *The beginnings of the Christian Church*, as a Hegelian resolver of paradoxes, makes him far too philosophical. But there are some curious parallels with certain modern theologians—with Bonhoeffer's suffering God in an alien world, with Bishop Robinson's teaching about uncovenanted love as the ground of being, and the like. Now that so many theologians have abandoned the usual belief in providence, and the argument from design, and are basing theology on dramatic symbolism rather than on cosmic

The Apostles' Creed

rationalism, perhaps we shall hear more of Marcion. "It is ironical," say A. Q. Morton and James McLeman, in *Paul, the man and the myth* (Hodder & Stoughton, 358.), "that this despised second-century heretic may now be credited with a truer historical and religious insight than his catholicising contemporaries."