

**THE MEANING OF THE
CREED; PAPERS ON
THE APOSTLES' CREED**

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The meaning of the creed; papers on the Apostles' Creed by G. K. A. Bell

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G. K. A. BELL

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THE CREED

PAPERS ON THE APOSTLES' CREED

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY THE
VERY REV. G. K. A. BELL

DEAN OF CANTERBURY

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INTRODUCTION

I

The Meaning of the Creed is the title given to fourteen papers on the articles of the Apostles' Creed now collected in a single volume. These papers were printed first of all as separate tracts, under the supervising editorship of the two Regius Professors of Divinity in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Dr. H. S. Holland and Dr. V. H. Stanton ; and they were issued in direct connection with the National Mission of Repentance and Hope, as part of the literature produced under its auspices. That Mission, as has been stated many times, was and is (for it is still in progress) a Mission of the Church, the aim of which is "to call the men and women of England to earnest and honest repentance of our sins and shortcomings as a nation, and to claim that in the Living Christ—in the loyal acceptance of Him as the Lord of all life, individual and social—lies the one sure Hope in the light of which the strain, the sorrows and the sacrifices of the war, and the task of renewal and reconstruction when the war is over, may 'be faced.'" But it was recognised by all who had to do both with the initiation and the general work of the Mission that to persuade men to this loyal

acceptance of the Living Christ many things besides mere calling and claiming were necessary. In particular it was said that the endeavour which must lie at the root of the whole project was "the removal, if it may be, of popular misconception as to the character of the Gospel message and its relation to the daily life of ordinary men and women." It would seem therefore that the publication of a short series of tracts, or explanatory papers, by well-known theologians, designed for "ordinary men and women" without a special philosophical training and yet with their minds awake to the problems of theology and seeking for light, would be of real assistance to this end. Such is the origin of these papers, which have now been reset and bound together, and supplemented with a bibliography kindly contributed by one of the writers.

II

A word or two may perhaps be of use as to the purpose of creeds themselves, and then as to the source, so far as that is known, of the Apostles' Creed.

A great many people seem to think that creeds are an excrescence of the Christian religion; a sort of "extra" imposed upon mankind by rigid and designing ecclesiastics. We are reproached for our "cold Christs and tangled Trinities," and the implication is that they are cold or tangled because our creeds have made them so. A creed is a fetter on thought, so the charge runs, and in the new age of freedom such fetters must go.

It is not to be denied that there is some justification for the charge, in the way in which we sometimes talk about and use the creeds. But as a matter of fact all the best Christian teachers agree that the Christian Creed, whatever its form, has a very different origin and serves a very different purpose. A creed is a personal affirmation of belief. *Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem. . . . Et in Iesum Christum Filium eius unicum. . . . Credo in Spiritum Sanctum.* I believe in God the Father Almighty. . . . And in Jesus Christ His only Son. . . . I believe in the Holy Ghost. But it is most important to remember that the Creed, though an affirmation, never pretended to explain the Christian faith, much less to exhaust it.

First of all it was intended to assert the historical basis of the Christian Religion. It recorded facts which had taken place in the visible world, and insisted that the Revelation which was at its centre was a Revelation in history. Such a "confession" of the chief facts of the evangelical story was very early recognised to be necessary as well in dealing with those outside the Church as in assuring those within it. Of this we have various important indications in the New Testament itself. There is, for example, the statement of St. Paul in Romans x. 10: "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"; and again the summary of the "words" in which he had preached the Gospel to the Corinthians: "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according

to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He hath been raised again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. xv. 1-4). There is the eunuch's confession before he was baptised, which, whether it is authentic or not in this particular instance of a baptism, at least points to a very early practice connected with baptism: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts viii. 37). And there are also fragments of primitive Christian hymns, as in 1 Timothy iii. 16:

"He who was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the spirit,
Seen of angels,
Preached among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory":

in which some of the articles of the Christian belief are summarised.

But in addition to this historical motive of the Christian Creed, we have also to remember that, especially with the longer creeds, a very prominent function of the creed was its negative purpose. It was meant to rule out particular rationalistic explanations, and to protest against dogmatic denials of certain things which the Christian believed to be fundamental. Thus Richard Hooker, in discussing the Incarnation of the Son of God, writes as follows:—

"It is not in man's ability either to express perfectly or conceive the manner how this was brought to pass. But the strength of our faith is tried by those things wherein our wits and capacities are not strong. Howbeit, because this