

Alternative Creeds in Liturgical Worship

I. Introduction

II. The Function of Creeds in Worship

III. The Apostle's Creed

IV. Creeds and Twenty-First Century Spirituality

V. Alternative General Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

VI. Seasonal Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

VII. Off the Beaten Path: Non-doctrinal Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

VIII. Focus Groups: Data and Conclusions

IX. Potential Contributions of Alternative Creeds to the Cultural/Theological Questions of Our Time

I. Introduction

"Thus continuity and change are to be seen not only as non-contradictory: they are to be seen as mutually supportive and as mutually affirming, by a process analogous in some respects to the transcendent perichoresis or 'co-inherence' of the three divine hypostases in the Trinity." — Jaroslav Pelikan ¹

For much of history, churches have incorporated creeds in their worship to express a common faith identity. The Apostle's Creed with its Roman roots is more common in the West, while the Nicene Creed has stronger moorings in the Christian Orthodox world. The recitation of one or the other of those so-called "Ecumenical Creeds" is an integral part of the Roman Catholic Mass, the Eastern Orthodox Liturgies and most traditional Protestant services to this day. In my own practice as a Lutheran pastor I have spoken, prayed and recited the Apostle's Creed innumerable times along with my congregants.

About eight years ago, I started searching for alternative creedal material. I call it "alternative" because my intention was never to replace the traditional creeds or question the sacred status they hold in my tradition. I was looking for material that could open pathways to a better understanding of our faith in the context of our time and serve as another liturgical option. While I love tradition, I am not a traditionalist. In my view, liturgy needs to breathe and be contextual. It can be enriched by including contemporary language in a tasteful way. This requires walking a fine line and is not an easy task at all. As I reviewed several contemporary creeds, I became even more aware of the daunting task of introducing something that is faithful to core Christian beliefs, fresh, more accessible to new Christians and, most of all, pleasing to the Holy Spirit. By "pleasing to the Holy Spirit" I don't mean doctrinal correctness, (whatever that means to the reader) but a combination of truth and beauty. I hope you agree with me that truth and beauty combined must be pleasing to the Spirit of God. In the traditional Protestant Confessions we have too often focused on truth alone, at the expense of beauty. To me, the flow and grace of a creed, its poetic images and overall literary quality are as important as its theological statements.

So I reviewed a number of contemporary creeds, was foolish enough to write some of my own and included some of them in the worship life of my congregation. I am so grateful for the Pastoral Study Grant from the Louisville Institution, which enabled me to study this subject in depth, first by learning more about the history of our Christian creeds and then also by selecting various modern creeds for study and analysis.

When, as part of this study, I conducted focus groups in six different congregations in southeastern Pennsylvania in the spring of 2016, some people asked me: "Well, why did

you do this?" Indeed, I asked myself: what was my motive for introducing "alternative" creeds? The best answer I can give is this: I followed my intuition. I felt that the recitation of the creed had become "routine" to the community that gathered every Sunday for worship in my church, including myself. This is, of course, a highly subjective perception on my part and will not reflect the feelings of all those who worshipped with me. Most of us will agree, however, that the automation of responses is one of the more problematic aspects of worship—at the very least a double-edged sword. Although automation is something we all fall back on in our spiritual practices and it isn't inherently bad, and even beneficial to some degree (after all, every professional develops automated processes), when our worship is in auto-pilot and our responses become detached from our hearts, it deprives us of worship's true purpose: connecting with God, or rather: allowing God to connect with us. Some of our contemporaries might call this kind of automated worship "religious, but not spiritual."

There are basically two ways we can go about avoiding this pitfall: one is to re-educate the congregation about the deeper meaning and theological relevance of the traditional creedal statements and other liturgical responses, essentially deepening the understanding of the different worship components. Another way is to alternate certain responses and introduce creeds that shed a different light on aspects of our faith and are easier to access for contemporary people. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I believe one can greatly benefit from the other. For pastors who prefer different worship tracks, the first approach will appeal to "traditional" worship, whereas the latter might have a more meaningful place in "contemporary" or "blended" worship styles. In my own opinion, the two approaches are equally important for both worship styles.

In the process of my research I was bound to come across one of the greatest church historians of recent times, Jaroslav Pelikan. His book *Credo* provided a treasure trove of information and stimulating insights. Initially, I found the sheer volume of creedal material and the various implications for the teachings of our faith intimidating. What was I messing with here? But the study also allowed me to see that there has always been some fluidity in the creedal expressions of the church, or as Pelikan puts it in one chapter: there has always been "continuity and change." In addition, he points out that the rule of prayer (*Lex Orandi*) often led to the rule of faith (*Lex Credendi*) and not the other way around.² In other words, we might consider church teachings, such as the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a thoughtful reflection not only on Scripture but also on the developed prayers and liturgical expressions of the early churches. To use a metaphor: many doctrines spent a certain time in the womb of the church, growing in its worshipping communities before they were "born,"—finalized and ratified, usually after much wrangling.

If that's the way the spirit works, chances are, she is still working that way today in our churches on a grass roots level. And while one does not need to condone every liturgical experiment in the name of the spirit, I do think there ought to be some room for those of us who lovingly and responsibly wrestle with our tradition and care to be innovators and creators. So, in the spirit of Pelikan's words, liturgical continuity and change are viewed as non-contradictory and mutually supportive in this study.

This approach will remind some people of the Emerging Church Movement, a contemporary current of diverse Christian theologies. Indeed, as I dug deeper into the various expressions and styles of so-called emerging churches, I found some of my own inclinations and interests echoed. For instance, I share with many of the emerging church leaders a love for the mystery of the Holy Trinity, skepticism about the usefulness of closed (and often static) systematic theological systems, a sense of freedom about creative expressions of worship and the need for us to be in perpetual conversation with our culture.

This project will be looking at various grassroots creeds and will analyze them in terms of their theology and what they may add to the profession of our faith in our time. It is then up to pastors and worship communities to decide whether some of those creeds reflect their theologies or provide a useful update of language and imagery for their people. Perhaps they will like aspects of certain creeds and prefer to tweak other parts. I have done that in my own work, so I don't expect that people will necessarily look at these creeds as finished products. In any case, I hope that my analysis of each selected creed will provide a better understanding and assist in the spiritual-theological discernment that comes with the task of introducing such material to public worship.

When I met other PSP grant recipients to discuss our respective projects, a group of a dozen or so pastors, I was made aware of some other important considerations. For one, I learned that only one quarter of the pastors in my group used creeds in their worship practices. This ratio neatly falls in line with the findings of a large survey conducted among (mostly Protestant) U.S. congregations, which examined, among other things, creed use and other changes since 1945. According to those findings, only a fifth of surveyed congregations always included creeds or statements of faith in worship. That one fifth comprised the usual suspects: Episcopal, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Reformed Christians, as well as those from historically black denominations.³

Today, credal expressions are often viewed with suspicion, especially among newer Protestant groups, for several reasons. There is historic baggage related to the fact that creeds and confessions of faith have often been purposefully divisive. Creeds often set

up theological fences against the beliefs of others. Now, in a global and pluralistic world, this creedal territorialism seems anachronistic. It reflects a village mentality. In addition, there are political and power implications. A creed can be viewed as an instrument of the church hierarchy to enforce the standardization of faith, making sure people "fall in line." It is no coincidence that the first official creed was ordered by the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, at the council of Nicaea in 325. Thus, creeds and power have been historically linked in ways that turn the message of Jesus upside down. Finally, at least in the Northern and Western hemispheres of the globe, we live in a world that nurtures individualism and, in the context of the Christian religion, emphasizes "personal" faith. What the individuals who come together for worship believe, can (and usually does) differ greatly. How can we agree on professing one particular creed at the same time as people follow so many different scripts in terms of what they believe and how they believe?

This study is obviously written on the premise that creeds are still important, specifically in the context of Christian worship. A creed can bind us together as a faithful community and envelope us in the greater and time-transcending narrative of the gospel. The two most commonly used traditional creeds fare well in that regard. Today, using a creed in worship may have a surprising upside: it can be a counter-cultural, prophetic, confessional act in the vein of the Jesus tradition, reminding us of the one who is greater than all our individual thoughts, questions, and tastes.

What kinds of alternative creeds will be analyzed in this study? Let me say it negatively first. What I want to stay away from are creedal documents that smack of denominational defense mechanisms, creeds in other words, that set worshippers apart from other Christians—or non-Christians for that matter. What I also want to stay away from are highly individualized creeds that may be very creative, insightful, and thought-provoking but come without any consideration of the Christian faith and its historical teachings. I have, however, included two examples of highly creative creeds, mainly to show the implications and special problems that come with highly individualized creeds.

What I want to explore mainly are creeds that have the power to bridge different Christian communities, that can perhaps even speak in some way to people who would not call themselves "believers." What I am interested in are creeds which may not be doctrinally complete but are theologically responsible and formulate Christian faith in terms that matter to a broad spectrum of Christian people. What I am interested in are creeds that speak about people on the journey rather than expounding a catalogue of beliefs that we want them to buy into. I will structure the creedal material which I study here in three categories:

- A) General creeds
- B) Seasonal creeds, written for certain liturgical seasons
- C) Non-doctrinal creeds (off the beaten path)

Notes:

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo*, p. 28–29.

² Pelikan cites the dogma of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary as a more recent example of this principle, "...the dogma of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary does not achieve formally defined dogmatic status in Roman Catholicism until 1 November 1950, with the issuance of the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* by Pope Pius XII. But long before the dogmatic and confessional promulgation of it, there are already liturgical observances of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin in the West and—or, in the East, the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos for many centuries..." He continues: "Although the definition of the of the dogma of the assumption is one of the most recent instances of the application of the axiom that 'the rule of prayer should lay down the rule of faith, ' the most ancient and most important documentation of this principle is the dogma of the Trinity, specifically of the doctrine of the full and coequal divinity of the Son of God, and subsequently (though by a significantly different route) the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as God" (Pelikan, *Credo*, p. 167).

³ The survey is mentioned by Joan Huyser-Honig from Calvin College in "The Case for Reciting Creeds in Worship," www.worship.calvin.edu. Specifically, Huyser-Honig quotes these findings: "The survey found that churches founded before 1945 are more likely to recite creeds in worship than those founded after 1945. Researchers noted an inverse proportion between always using creeds or statements of faith in worship and always using electronic instruments. A 2002 Barna study on differences between pastors' and parishioners' worship views discovered that while 38 percent of laypeople said reciting creeds is important, only 14 percent of pastors agreed. Many groups affirm what's expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds but choose not to use creeds in worship, stating they have 'no creed but Christ.'"

II. The Function of Creeds in Worship

*"Reciting the creed at worship is thus a countercultural act."*¹ — Luke Timothy Johnson

Creeds began to emerge early on in Christian worship and instruction. Scholars like J.N.D. Kelly, the author of the standard work *Early Christian Creeds*, and others agree that they emerged from the catechetical instructions given to people preparing for baptism. The "Rule of Faith," as the creed was also called, served the purpose of teaching the apostolic tradition clearly and succinctly while setting boundaries against competing teachings (heresies). The practice of catechumens reciting a creed in preliminary interrogations before baptism reaches back to at least the late second century. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, this use "is found as early as the 'Canons' of Hippolytus and the 'Catecheses' of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and is so universal as to be probably of still earlier date. (Cf. Acts 8:37)."²

The practice of reciting the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creed as part of the Eucharistic liturgy also began soon after the canonization of this creed, in the fifth and sixth centuries. It's clear that the early church viewed this as an important educational tool, a way to achieve unity among the churches and to encourage doctrinal discipline. According to the Third Council of Toledo (589), the creed was supposed to be located immediately after the breaking of the bread. Charlemagne (742–814), the great promoter and protector of the Christian faith in the West, ordered the creed to be sung immediately after the gospel. This became standard practice throughout the Western church and was accepted formally by the Roman Church under Pope Benedict VIII in 1014.³

The Reformers of the sixteenth century basically continued the practice. Its importance as part of Christian worship and teaching was not questioned at all. In fact, Martin Luther wrote in his preface to the German Mass, "This instruction or catechization I cannot put better or more plainly than has been done from the beginning of Christendom and retained till now, i.e. in these three parts, the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Our Father. These three plainly and briefly contain everything that a Christian need to know."⁴

As Protestantism branched out further in the following centuries and as worship became more diverse, an increasing number of church bodies chose not to employ creedal language anymore or to issue their own "Declaration of Faith." Some of it had to do with the rejection of institutional ecclesiastical power, which had stifled and persecuted certain groups (Quakers, Mennonites, etc.) and some of it had to do with doctrinal concerns, but a great deal can be attributed also to the emerging individualism of the modern age. It

seems that most of the more vocal modern voices in favor of the creedal tradition were already fighting an uphill battle against the currents of the individualistic zeitgeist.

In 1902, Philadelphia-based Episcopal rector and teacher Alfred G. Mortimer wrote an influential study about the three traditional Christian creeds. He emphasized the uniqueness of Creeds in Christianity compared with other religions with the following statement: "Among the characteristics which distinguish Christianity from all other religions of the world, one of the most prominent is its possession of a Creed and of a system of dogmatic theology."⁵ He identified the creeds as the primal structure of theology—literally the backbone of church teachings: "Hence in studying the Creeds, we are carried back to the earliest ages of the Church and to the skeletons around which all her dogmatic theology has grown."⁶ It's easy to see that the recitation of the creeds in worship has served for centuries as an important educational tool to instill in believers the most basic knowledge of God, as Christians understand God.

Contemporary scholars, noting the decline of creedal language in worship, have also stressed their importance as an educational tool. Presbyterian scholar Kenneth L. Gentry writes:

the Church is commanded in the Old Testament (Shema, Deut. 6:4-25) and the New Testament Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) to teach the Bible's truth to others. This teaching process will necessarily deal with fundamental, selected truths at first, truths such as are outlined and organized in a creed.⁷

It is, however, necessary in my view, to question whether the simple recitation of creeds is an effective educational tool anymore. I would argue that it is not, unless properly explained. In the pre-enlightenment age, when biblical literalism was commonplace, the Apostle's Creed might have been a fine educational tool that summarized the Trinitarian structure and the most important touchstones of our faith: creation, incarnation, death and resurrection, salvation and eternal life. In our time that is not enough. From the Virgin Birth to Jesus' descent into She'ol, modern ears will want to know in a much more profound way: what does that mean? Scholars like Luke Timothy Johnson emphasize the "mythical" nature of the creed, something that is under-taught in our churches and Christian Education programs. Johnson writes, reflecting on the particular challenges of the so-called post-modern world: "The creed tells the world a truth about itself that the world does not know. The power of the Christian myth, found in its clearest and most compelling form in the creed rather than in Scripture, should not be underestimated, especially in a world whose best alternative is an endless and pointless evolution."⁸

Yet, my guess is that most worshippers in traditional liturgical settings, the worship settings where the creeds are most commonly employed, are not aware of the mythical nature of parts of the creed; they might even be upset or confused by the suggestion that the Christian Creed has mythical overtones. The terms "myth" and "mythical" still have negative connotations for many church people. They are often equated with "untruth" and "fiction." Therefore, it will take a lot more than frequent recitation in worship to reclaim the creed as a meaningful educational tool.

It appears to me that the strongest argument in favor of using creeds in worship these days differs somewhat from the traditional arguments, which are: facilitating Christian education, ecumenical unity, doctrinal discipline and so forth. The traditional arguments have been weakened by external forces, such as the historical criticism of the Bible and its story, on which the creeds are based. The questions that have arisen since Enlightenment times can't just be drowned out by repeating the same statements of faith over again. At the very least, the body of the church needs to learn what those statements might mean on a spiritual level, above and beyond the words.

At the same time, the traditional arguments for using creeds in worship have also been weakened by internal forces in Christianity, namely the emergence of non-liturgical churches who follow a different worship philosophy and the simultaneous decline of those churches that adhere to a liturgical tradition. If only a fraction of churches use creeds anymore, how can they bring about unity and stand for a catholic church in the true sense of the word? If the creeds need major explanation and people don't take time for Christian classes in church, how can a creed still be an educational tool in worship? These questions point at the fundamental crisis of the creedal tradition.

In my opinion, the strongest argument in favor of using creeds in worship comes from Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson and it aims straight at the greatest weakness of our post-modern society, the fractioned soul of an individualist culture. Johnson argues in favor of people reciting the historic Christian creeds:

In a world that celebrates individuality, they are actually doing something together. In an age that avoids commitment, they pledge themselves to a set of convictions and thereby to each other. In a culture that rewards novelty and creativity, they use words written by others long ago. In a society where accepted wisdom changes by the minute, they claim that some truths are so critical that they must be repeated over and over again. In a throwaway, consumerist world, they accept, preserve, and continue tradition. Reciting the creed at worship is thus a countercultural act.⁹

Johnson, a Roman Catholic theologian and New Testament scholar, is supported by an unlikely ally in his appreciation for the ancient Christian creeds. The late Robert E. Webber, an influential Evangelical theologian, respected for his work on worship and the early church, coined the phrase of the "ancient-future church." Throughout his theological journey, Webber emphasized that worship needs to be rooted in God's story rather than trying to be everything to everybody. That would favor the use of a creed as summary of "God's story" and as audible and visible connection with our Christian ancestors. And the mythical language of the creed might be surprisingly helpful again in contemporary times. Webber wrote: "The story of Christianity moves from a focus on mystery in the classical period, to institution in the medieval era, to individualism in the Reformation era, to reason in the modern era, and, now, in the postmodern era, back to mystery."¹⁰

Some branches of the newest church movement, the ever elusive, multi-faceted Emergent Church, are advocating the use of ancient creeds again, much for the same reasons that Luke Timothy Johnson so beautifully stated. For instance, Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, a non-liturgical Evangelical according to his background, writes:

As in any culture and in any time period, with the emerging church there are some theological issues that are raising more questions than others. We will always be grappling with theological questions and issues depending on the culture and time period. Even so, we can still have an anchor of belief and a foundation of essential core doctrines. For me, it is the Nicene Creed. If our church today, as a community together, was never to know of the Nicene Creed and then opened the Bible to explore and study it, we probably would end up with the same conclusions.¹¹

Leafing through the literature of the Emerging Church authors, one can sense a hunger of people in this hyper-fragmented post-modern world to belong to a greater community, to be rooted in an ancient faith, to be communal rather than individualistic, to find God in mystery rather than in a belief system. The question that I pursue in this study is whether creeds can in some way respond to this hunger and void. We will begin with a closer examination of the Apostle's Creed and its historic theological context and purpose. We will later try to discern what our current cultural context is and how the Apostle's Creed does or does not relate to the questions of our time. We will then move on to the examination of several alternative creeds.

Notes

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 40.

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*, see www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/creed-liturgical-use-of.

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 63.

⁴ Luther's Works 53, "Liturgy and Hymns," p. 64-65.

⁵ Mortimer, *The Creeds*, Introduction, ix.

⁶ Mortimer, *The Creeds*, Introduction, xiv.

⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., "The Usefulness of Creeds," Grace Online Library

<http://graceonlinelibrary.org/creeds-confessions/the-usefulness-of-creeds-by-kenneth-l-gentry-jr/>.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 304.

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed*, p. 40-41.

¹⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Re-Thinking the Faith* ????

¹¹ Robert E. Webber, general editor, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, p. 94.

III. The Apostle's Creed

*"It is obvious that the teaching of the Gnostics was diametrically opposed to apostolic teaching. What was needed therefore by the Christian to combat this perversion of Christian truth was a summary of the Christian faith, an authoritative answer to the Gnostic threat."*¹ — Robert E. Webber

I selected the Apostle's Creed as point of reference for other creedal material because in my own tradition it's much more commonly used than the Nicene Creed. Although the Nicene Creed is without doubt the more profound, theologically rich and ecumenically relevant document, the Apostle's Creed is probably overall better known among the people in North American Churches; it is also, for all practical purposes, easier to memorize and recite and still widely used in the traditional Baptism rite.

I would like to summarize a few important facts about the origin of this creed for the general audience. The title "Apostle's Creed" is somewhat misleading as it can't be traced back to the apostles of the New Testament but is based on an early apostolic tradition. It's essentially a refined version of an old Roman Creed which was in circulation in various forms in the Western church of the late Roman period in Northern Italy, Gaul, the Balkans, Spain and North Africa. The old Roman Creed was used mainly in the context of catechetical instruction and baptism.

The earliest appearance of the Apostle's Creed—according to Kelly without "serious doubt"—is found in the tract *"De singulis libris canonicis scarapsus"* by the famous Priminus, founder and first abbot of the monastery in Reichenau near Lake Constance in southern Germany. The tract appeared at some point between 710 and 724. Priminus quoted the Apostle's Creed three different times in his missionary manual.² The Apostle's Creed presents an enriched version of the Old Roman Creed. The most significant phrases added to the Roman predecessor creed were creator "of heaven and earth" in the first article, Jesus's descent into hell and the phrase "Jesus Christ" (instead of "Christ Jesus") in the second article, as well as the phrases "communion of saints" and "life everlasting" in the third article. There are various explanations as to why these phrases might have been added, which we will not further expand on here. The exact origins of this "new" creed are shrouded in history. Whether it was finalized in Rome itself or whether it originated in one of the Christian provinces, Kelly concludes that "very few will be likely to deny that its origin is to be sought somewhere north of the Alps at some date in the late sixth or seventh century."³ It is also clear that Charlemagne and the Frankish church, which generally pursued Roman ideals in the celebration of the mass and the

administration of sacraments, played a key role in promoting this creed. Finally, the Apostle's Creed was treated as authoritative creed in the West in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and became the official text (of the original Roman creed) at Rome itself from the twelfth century onward.⁴

The Creed of course follows a basic Trinitarian structure: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As in most early Christian creeds, the second article about Jesus is by far the longest and most specific, a reflection of the early church's aggressive attempt to reject Gnosticism. There are Gnostic elements and counter-arguments already in New Testament literature, especially in the gospel and the letters of John and in the letters attributed to Paul. As the word "*Gnosis*" (knowledge) suggests, Gnostics believed that knowledge trumped everything, that it was in fact salvation. Gnostics devalued the body and the physical world in favor of a spiritual existence. And so, the Apostle's Creed offers a thorough rejection of Gnosticism on all levels. The short description in the following paragraph won't account for all the different expressions of Gnostic thinking, but the beliefs mentioned below were typical of Gnostic schools of thought.

Although some Gnostics suggested the existence of two gods, one good and one evil, the Apostle's Creed speaks of one God in three expressions. While Gnostics tended to trace their thoughts to a secret tradition, the Apostle's Creed claimed its heritage in the apostolic tradition, based on the teachings of those who had been with Jesus and their successors. While Gnostics viewed creation as "evil matter," the Apostle's Creed suggests that God made heaven and earth, which implies a connection to Genesis 1 with the understanding that the created world is "good." While Gnostics tended to deny that Jesus was God in flesh and promoted the idea that he only seemed to be human (Docetism), the early Christian creed painstakingly lists the human journey of Jesus: born, suffered, died, was raised, with even some historic markers (such as "suffered under Pontius Pilate"). While Gnostics did not believe in a resurrection of the flesh, the creed makes that point. And while Gnostics basically believed in salvation through knowledge, Christians believed in salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection, leading to eternal life, as stated in the Apostle's Creed. So, it's clear that the Apostle's Creed evolved in response to the challenge posed by the Gnostic movement. It forced the church to formulate her beliefs more clearly and authoritatively.⁵

As with every old text, indeed as with scripture itself, the creed needs interpretation to ensure it's understood in the context of a new culture in which people approach it with entirely different questions and spiritual leanings. The great gift of the Apostle's Creed, one that has helped it endure over the centuries, lies in the simple fact that it sticks to the Christian story in altogether affirmative terms. The average reader and worshipper

will not feel drawn into an old conflict unless they are educated about its historical roots. It's simply a very mature document in that regard, one that anchors the worshipping community in the story of Christ and in Trinitarian theology. Yet, there are some questions about this creed that every pastor has been asked. What does it mean to believe in the Virgin birth? Did Jesus really descend into hell and where does it say that in the Bible? Is God almighty and if so, why are so many horrible things happening on earth? It takes very careful and thoughtful interpretation to do those questions justice. Brother David Steindl-Rast's exposition *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostle's Creed*, is the best in-depth meditation I have come across so far. Here is an example...

His chapter "Born of the Virgin Mary," begins with the following statement: "Born of the Virgin Mary means that the birth of Jesus Christ—in the world as well as in the hearts that trust in him—marks the dew-fresh dawn of a new beginning. Virgin birth is a mythic image for an altogether new start."⁵ This reference to mythology reframes the interpretation of this oft-maligned statement, away from historic literalism, on to a more spiritual and poetic hermeneutic. It explains what the coming of Jesus historically has meant for Christians (a radical new beginning in our relationship with God); but the language is at the same time broadly accessible and not dependent on church affiliation or acceptance of a specific doctrine. Who has not longed for a "dew-fresh dawn of a new beginning" at one point or another? This all-inclusive approach—exploring the mythical statements of the Apostle's Creed and interpreting them in broad, existentialist ways—might get a fair chance among people who profess to be spiritual but not religious. Thus, the traditional creeds might indeed experience a renaissance, that is, if churches and congregations begin to teach them in more depth.

It has been made clear throughout this chapter that the Apostle's Creed emerged from a specific theological struggle: the early church's fight against Gnostic voices inside and outside of the church. Although this theological battle was an important one, transcending time and culture and touching on some timeless questions, I wonder whether contemporary people have questions about faith which are more spiritually urgent to them and indeed to our culture.

I received some hints from my focus groups. Some people wondered about the ethical teachings of Jesus. Are they not an important and fundamental part of our faith, of what we believe and what Jesus' followers stand for to this day? For instance, some noted the absence of Jesus' teachings in the creed. Others remarked that there was no mentioning of God's grace or love or not enough emphasis on forgiveness. But all those professed values (forgiveness, love, grace, etc.), this fundamental way of thinking about God and our own responsibility in life, have deeply influenced all our churches: Protestant,

Catholic, non-denominational and emerging ones alike. Besides our basic belief in God, in Christ, in the Trinity, it is those "Christian values," for lack of a better term, that bind us together. In fact, those values provide a better opening towards dialogue with non-church people, skeptics, and people from other religions than mere language about God, at least in my opinion. Of course, it needs to be said that the core function of worship and reciting creeds in worship is not to open dialogue with others; yet would it not be nice and beneficial if our spoken creeds could also serve in some way in that capacity and could make people curious about our faith when they come across it?

This leads me to another important point. The ancient ecumenical creeds typically emerged as result of intense theological battles with and ultimately against competing teachings ("heresies"), such as Gnosticism, Arianism, etc. Most contemporary alternative creeds which will be evaluated in this study are the result of a radically different cultural approach. Generally-speaking, their aim is to speak **to culture** rather than drawing a separation line **away from culture**. Their aim is to make the Christian faith relevant in a post-Christian world rather than shaping its path in a pre-Christian world. I don't want to be naive, but could it be that the Holy Spirit, in a matter of many centuries, has moved us ever so slowly beyond the battle stage towards a culture of dialogue and inclusion? Well let's listen to some of the Christian religious seekers of our time, the questions they wrestle with and the approaches they favor.

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots*, p. 149.

² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 399.

³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 420.

⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, p. 427.

⁵ The notes here based on Webber's comparisons in *Common Roots*, p. 150-151.

⁶ Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words*, p. 71.

IV. Creeds and Twenty-First-Century Spirituality

*"The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all."*¹ — Karl Rahner

As we look at the creeds of the church we cannot ignore the people who are asked to profess these statements of faith. Who are they? Are they comfortable with this practice? At a time of ever more individualized spirituality, deeply imbedded skepticism towards institutionalized formulations of faith, creeds can easily seem out of place. There are reasons why so many Christian churches and worship communities in our time refrain from using creeds. Hinrich Stoevesandt, in 1970, described it as "discomfort with creed caused by the consciousness of modernity."² Few things are more offensive to modern and post-modern sensibilities than being told what to think and what to believe. The proliferation of Protestant statements of faith, mushrooming in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across an ever-diversifying landscape of Christian denominations, had a decidedly cerebral constitution and did exactly that: telling people what do believe and often, what not to believe. Meanwhile, religion in America and elsewhere moved away from the headiness of the rational age which dominated most European heritage churches, instead embracing religious feeling and spiritual practices as more desirable mentors. This can be shown in the global success of the Pentecostal movement over the last one hundred years and in the growing popularity of eastern meditative practices in the West, especially since the 1960s. In an article about American religion in the twenty-first century and the future of religion in this country—based on the predictions of sixteen leading religion experts—the author remarks:

While religion of the mind has never been particularly strong - much of American religion has, in fact, thrived on anti-intellectualism - the tradition of cognitive faith, based on creeds and rigorous theologies, appears to be falling farther back in the competition with religions of experience and feeling...Engagement of body and soul will appeal to seekers far more than 'thinking' traditions such as Presbyterianism and the Reformed churches that rely much more heavily on a cerebral approach that rests on a sophisticated, intellectual, theological set of beliefs.³

So, what about the use of creeds in this twenty-first century? The title of this chapter may be a little bit misleading. I doubt that there is such a thing as "twenty-first-century spirituality," at least not in the singular. Our world is far too big, diverse, and dynamic to capture the spirituality of our age. In religious terms, but not only in that respect, our times have often been described as transient, changing, transformative or "emerging." The landscape of Christian religion in North America has been shifting for some time now.

As a result, the various Christian denominations which traditionally represent the creedal traditions have been struggling and shrinking across the board.

Phyllis Tickle, in her book about Emergence Christianity, points at various hallmarks of Emergence Christianity that will need to be taken to account by any church that seeks to reach and learn from newer generations. This is relevant for our study object as it helps us understand how creeds might or might not speak to people in this transient age. I am gleaning some of Tickle's descriptions of emergence Christians from various parts of her book:⁴

- A) An appreciation of story, imagination and creativity
- B) Skepticism toward propositional truth and dogmatic exegesis
- C) Grace over morality
- D) Orthopraxy over orthodoxy
- E) Rejection of institutions
- F) A new appreciation of science
- G) An openness for mysticism and paradox, "both/and approach."

This is of course, not a complete list, but it will serve as a set of criteria against which I will contemplate the use of creeds in worship. How may these religious/cultural tendencies influence the teaching and reciting of creeds in our times?

From the outset, I want to emphasize that the above-mentioned criteria aren't capturing all Christian spirituality; they represent the preferences of an emerging group. In fact, we will not know until at some point in the future whether these criteria are truly shaping and transforming our culture or whether they are just a fleeting phenomenon. As a practicing pastor and a representative of my own generation (Generation X), I can only say, subjectively, that I find these criteria compelling and ringing true for many of the younger people I meet. I sense that our culture is shifting in that direction.

Naturally, some of these criteria will be alien to a considerable portion of parishioners in most creedal churches. People who like tradition or are "traditionalist" will not care for "new" creeds, value creative approaches or relate to creeds that aren't stating traditional Christian teachings in familiar ways. People who have a very strong doctrinal foundation will appreciate more teaching-oriented creeds. In fact, in the focus groups which I ran with mostly elderly parishioners (Founder's generation and Baby Boomers) that's what I often heard regarding some of the newer creeds which I introduced: "not clear enough";

"not enough meat!" "too vague!" And while some of it can be explained with the deficiencies of some of these alternative creeds, I suspect that it also has something to do with the spiritual tastes and comfort zones of those generations.

So, this set of "emergence" criteria represent preferred modes of thinking among newer generations. They point at different ways of accessing religion compared to the questions and answering formulas that have shaped church culture in the recent past. I will attempt a brief reflection on the use of creeds in response to each of these "emerging" religious preferences. And I will do so by considering both the traditional creeds and newer, alternative creeds.

A) An Appreciation of Story, Imagination and Creativity

The Apostle's Creed, in its long second article, is more about story telling than summarizing of beliefs. It provides a brief synopsis of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, which becomes the centerpiece of the creed. The Apostle's Creed requires the faithful flock's imagination to appreciate some of its biggest and most daring statements. The potential to explore the Virgin Birth or Jesus' Descent into Hell based on hermeneutics that explore its mythical language is still largely untapped. If accessed, it may well speak to people who appreciate story, imagination and creativity in new and surprising ways. Similar things could be said about the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was borne out of theological discussions and battles over dogma, yet it tells the story just as well. The subtleties of the dogmatic battles of the fourth and fifth centuries, while they leave much more visible traces in the form of specific, peculiar statements ("begotten, not made!"), are not so dominant as to spoil this creed's storytelling. In fact, some of the statements require imagination to be accessed and are far more philosophical than any of the statements in the Apostle's Creed.

As for alternative creeds, they are of course quite capable of feeding people's desire for story and imagination. It will depend on how they are written and what they emphasize. A nice example of good story telling is the Celtic Creed, which will be presented and analyzed in the next chapter. Its origins are found in the Iona Abbey Community in north-western Scotland. This creed chooses to demythologize parts of the Apostle's Creed by making subtle or not-so-subtle changes in language and theology. For instance, "born of the Virgin Mary" is simplified to "born of a woman" and the "descent into hell" becomes an ordinary descent "into the earth to the place of death." Whether one agrees with this approach or not, the storytelling is superb and brings parts of Jesus' story alive even more viscerally.

*We believe in God beside us, Jesus Christ, the word made flesh,
born of a woman, servant of the poor, tortured and nailed to a tree.
A man of sorrows, he died forsaken.
He descended into the earth to the place of death.
On the third day he rose from the tomb.
He ascended into heaven, to be everywhere present,
and His kingdom will come on earth.*

An example of a highly creative and unorthodox creed is found on the UK-based website Fresh Expressions. The creed, dubbed as a creed for "20s and 30s," is unusual in that it eschews story-telling altogether; it is problematic on several levels—see the analysis in the next chapter. The main question is whether a creed so rich in aphorisms and so poor in narration and structure can work in Christian worship.

*We believe in a God of Justice
Compassion
Mercy
Hope
And first
A God of Love
Love personified
Incarnated*

To summarize: The ancient creeds, although born out of dogmatic battles and providing a clear teaching structure, offer story just as much as belief. Furthermore, the mythical and philosophical terms in these ancient creeds may encourage dialogue and stimulate various interpretations, thus offering some of the same benefits that makes storytelling so valuable in religious education. The advantage of alternative creeds is that they can emphasize aspects of the Christian faith that have grown to more prominence in recent times and integrate them in creative ways. The question will always be how it's done and whether it's done well.

B) Skepticism toward Propositional Truth and Dogmatic Exegesis

The attentive reader will no doubt discover that most of the emergence criteria explored here are intrinsically related. It only makes sense that people who appreciate story, creativity and imagination will be skeptical about teachings and interpretations that lead to propositional statements; statements, in other words, which are true or false by definition and tend to be divisive and judgmental. The following passage illustrates what many people are weary of regarding propositional truth: it very often represents a judgmental mindset.

Christians desperately need to approach the Bible differently. Not as some book of rational and logical propositions that prove why women are different than men, why gay people have something wrong with them, why our way is the best way, that God does in fact exist and how the world was created. The Bible is a fascinating collection of literature that invites us into seeing the world as a gift and gives a story to live into that will radically transform any community that sees it this way and lives into it. We cannot enter into God's story, know where we came from and know where are going and know how it happened and remain unchanged.⁵

What is propositional truth? I found the following definition helpful, stated by Dr. John H. Armstrong, author of several books and a long-time teacher and church planter in evangelical circles. Armstrong writes: "Proposition is a philosophical term that is used in logic to describe the content of assertions that are understood to be non-linguistic abstractions drawn from sentences that can be evaluated as either true or false."⁶ While this still sounds very abstract and perhaps a bit convoluted, the last part is most relevant for our exploration. Advocates for propositional truth will always be interested in the kind of truth that distinguishes between right and wrong, true and false, orthodoxy and heresy. They will gravitate towards Aristotelian logic, trying to capture the one true, definitive interpretation of a given scripture text rather than allowing several or even contradictory interpretations as potentially true. The history of church dogma is full of examples of people fighting over the one correct interpretation or formula.

In our days, especially evangelical church leaders and teachers are wrestling with the problem of whether propositional truth should be re-emphasized or de-emphasized in Christianity. Looking at some of the blogs, conversations and shout outs among evangelical leaders, one can sense a fear in certain corners about the Christian faith being "watered down."⁷ While most theologians and Christian teachers would argue that faith must make statements about truth, the insight is dawning that truth might not be captured in logical, philosophical categories alone. Again, Armstrong in the same blog writes:

Christian faith cannot be contained in logical formulas and the sooner we recognize this the better. I am not saying that Christian truth is anti-logical, or illogical, but rather that the truth rises above categories of human logic. It would be helpful, I believe, if this Greek influence on the church was submitted to the Hebrew-Christian thought forms of the Bible itself.⁸

So, what does this mean for the use of our traditional creeds in worship? Do they not make decisive statements about the Christian faith? Were they not forged to define Christian teaching and reject heresy? Are they not full of propositional statements? Well, not so fast. First, these statements are made in the form of a creed, in the context of a worshipping community, which make them more of a religious proposition: "I believe!" or "We believe!" Secondly, the statements made in the traditional creeds leave plenty of room for interpretation. Let us take the first article of the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Clearly, this poses a statement by the community of faith regarding their belief in a God who created (and creates) this world. But the statements are not so defined as to spell out what kind of God one believes in, whether that God fits a pure theistic mold or may be best described with elements of pan(en)theism; or both; it does not definitively determine whether one believes this act of creating happened through a big bang, evolution or literally the six-day model according to the creation story in Genesis. The creed leaves a lot of these things open for debate, and that is a good thing.

Let's take a more divisive statement—the proposition in the Apostle's Creed: "He will judge the living and the dead." This will be read as a reference to judgment day, Christ discerning between goats and sheep, between eternal salvation and damnation (Matthew 25). It will be understood by many Christians as referring to a final separation between those on the right and the wrong side of eternity. Those who interpret the judgment scene as a mythical concept, however, will come to a more differentiated and, I argue, deeper understanding of the passage, one that's not judgmental or propositional in nature. Brother David Steindl-Rast, in his wonderful book, *Deeper than Words* consistently reveals deeper layers of non-threatening truth from those statements of the creed. Regarding the judgment passage he writes: "On the deepest level it means that only those whose lives are attuned to divine justice are truly alive; the others are more dead than living. Justice is a matter of life and death since it is an aspect of our very being."⁹

Webber, the evangelical champion of the ancient creeds, points the way when he acknowledges the impossibility of containing "**the truth**" in words as he celebrates the language of the traditional creeds:

However, the genius of the creedal formulations is that they did not elevate the methodology or the final theological form as truth in and of itself. Instead, the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds pointed to the truth contained in Scriptures and summarized in the rule of faith as ultimately beyond the possibility of being captured in a comprehensive form.¹⁰

On the other hand, many of the Declarations of Faith issued by certain denominations still promote propositional truth. For example, this phrase opens a Declaration of Faith by the Church of God: "The Church of God believes the whole Bible to be completely and equally inspired and that it is the written Word of God."¹¹ It is precisely this narrowing of creedal statements to a "watertight" interpretation that tends to be rejected by emerging Christians.

Creeds that do not come out of the dogmatic workshop of Christian teaching traditions are less likely to incorporate the types of declarative statements that many people are weary of. Alternative creeds that capture faith in images and poetry rather than offering pure doctrinal declarations can fill the human need for faith affirmation in a complex and complicated world. Many of them do just that.

To summarize: Propositional truth tends to kill dialogue and create ideology (which is close linguistically to idolatry!), even in a religious context. The traditional creeds have been understood to carry many statements of propositional truth that separated right from wrong, orthodoxy from heresy. Yet, if the creeds are explored for their deeper spiritual truth, they may well open dialogue and be useful beyond the inner circle of traditional believers. Alternative creeds, by nature of their alternative form, are less likely to be accused of being authoritarian, final or set in stone, unless they represent a definitive statement of faith by a denomination. Alternative creeds can draw attention to other aspects of Christian truth that may have been neglected or may simply have become more relevant for a certain time and culture.

C) Grace over Morality

"Grace over works" was the rallying cry of the Lutheran Reformation, but contrary to popular perception, various concepts of grace were established in medieval scholastic theology. Furthermore, the notion of grace over works was of course a centerpiece of Paul's interpretation of the gospel. Nevertheless, the word "grace" is not included in the Apostle's or the Nicene creeds. Perhaps one reason for the lack of gratia language in the ancient creeds is the fact that the early church wasn't very occupied with the concept and problem of sin. Furthermore, the ancient creeds do not proclaim belief in abstract

concepts as most people and, indeed, most Christians do today. Contemporary people often profess their faith in big concepts, such as grace, love, hope or peace. In the ancient creeds these concepts are concealed in the story of God but never elevated to creedal status in and of themselves.

In my focus group series, I found that some people struggled with the emphasis on judgment in the Apostle's Creed. One person said he was bothered by the fact that, while the Apostle's Creed talks about Christ judging the living and the dead, it says nothing about his love and grace. I believe there is a disconnect in that regard between mainstream Christianity and the language of the ancient creeds. I mentioned in chapter III that the Christian virtues of unconditional love, grace, forgiveness, etc. bind the Christian community together across most denominational lines today. Would it not be good and theologically responsible and appropriate to include these virtues and ideals in the formulation of our creeds? After all, there is ample biblical justification for it.

Some of the alternative creeds discussed in the next chapter will incorporate such expressions. I found that they are usually warmly welcomed by people of all generations. Virtually everybody agrees that God's unconditional love is a core teaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 13:13; Luke 15; 1 John 4:8, etc.). The power of God's grace is a staple of Paul's writings. The notion of peace as a value of the faith community is felt throughout both testaments of the Bible and culminates in the story of the Nativity of Christ.

This Affirmation of Faith, which I found in a United Methodist Church worship resource, does a nice job of incorporating statements about God's grace and love (highlighted below) without overloading the creed or separating these sacred virtues from our faith in God, as is common in secular culture:

We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, power and love, whose mercy is over all his works, and whose will is ever directed to his children's good.

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need.

We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord, to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth.

One more word about the traditional creeds. Even though they are quiet about God's love and grace, we must note that the traditional creeds are not on the other hand moralistic. They don't catalogue sin. They don't bother to distinguish between sinner and saint particularly. They simply do not get into all that.

However, if the grace and love of God aren't explicitly mentioned, people reciting the creed might falsely perpetuate notions of morality as part of their faith identity. In my opinion it is important that this is countered by the inclusion of language that paints a picture of God as Jesus created it through his parables and teachings, promoting a theology that comes from the heart of the Christian gospel, at the center of which is a God of grace and love. Here we may see the limitations of the ancient creeds, since they were formulated against a set of competing beliefs of a certain historic period. Alternative creeds, as we have seen, can fill that gap and more strongly point at the qualities of God, the teachings of Jesus and the virtues of the new creation as embodied in Christ.

To summarize: Grace is an old Christian concept and an essential element of Christian theology. It was emphasized by the reformers of the sixteenth century and is a core concept of Protestant theology to this day. Yet, the concept of grace and love and any of the other big Christian virtues, which were taught by and embodied in Christ, are not directly mentioned in the early Ecumenical creeds. To the extent that they are concealed in the story of Christ, one can perhaps find them in the traditional creeds, but not easily. Alternative creeds can make up for this gap and more strongly emphasize these aspects of our Christian faith, which have become so much more important in the modern age and indeed, are almost universally embraced by various Christian churches.

D) Orthopraxy over Orthodoxy

The ancient creeds were established to ensure orthodoxy (right teaching) and adherence to the right teachings. This is true of the Apostle's Creed (against the heresy of Gnosticism) and of the Nicene Creed (against the heresy of Arianism). It is further true of most Reformation-era Declarations of Faith and Confessions (against the heresy of a religious merit system). They all try to establish the correct (in their view) Christian teachings, often by explicitly rejecting other interpretations of faith. My own Lutheran tradition has been especially vocal about the importance of the "*reine Lehre*" (pure doctrine) and has placed faith over and above works, which is not exactly conducive to the development of orthopraxy (right practice).

Of course, orthopraxy is more than works or good deeds and living the faith has always been part of the Christian identity. But what does it mean to "live the faith?" In the

church's storied past there were many practices and rituals that gave the community a sense of Christian identity and belonging, such as the observance of certain seasons, fasting, alms giving, Sunday observance, house blessings, confessions, daily prayers, etc. Besides, the Judeo-Christian faith tradition contains innumerable references to the importance of good and righteous acts. From the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures who decried religion that neglects the poor as noise (Amos 5) to Jesus' frequent bashing of religious hypocrites and his radical emphasis on "doing" the Word and will of God, to James' famous statement that faith without works is dead, the Bible possesses a very strong tradition of requiring the faithful to practice faith with more than words.

Even knowing the reasons and origins of Luther's emphasis on grace versus works and appreciating his historical stance, it's astonishing to me how much our faith has been reduced to "believing" under the influence of the Protestant movement. I cannot see that the biblical witness backs that up and I view it overall as a misinterpretation even of Luther's theology. At this point in time, I think most contemporary Christians understand the importance of good faith practices, but few will be able to say exactly what that means. There is a lot of confusion about it, as this blogger aptly observes:

I'd like to suggest that this early emphasis on "right belief" has seriously skewed the Christian tradition in ways that I don't think are all that healthy. Specifically, by emphasizing 'right belief' (orthodoxy) over "right practice" (orthopraxy), Christians have lost (or never acquired in the first place) a robust notion of "*Christian practice*". This is evidenced by the observation that most churches would not understand what it might mean to be an 'observant Christian' or a 'practicing Christian.' That is, Christianity isn't mainly understood as 'practice,' it is understood as 'belief.'¹²

So, if the practice of Christianity needs to be re-valued and re-established, what does that mean for our Christian creeds that have always emphasized orthodoxy and not particularly included orthopraxy? While right living (orthopraxy) can only ever be affirmed through our daily actions and not through declarations of faith, it is at least possible to point at our duty as Christians to act in ways that are congruent with the gospel and to provide Christians with a compass for practical Christian living. The traditional creeds leave some room for that in the third article, in the "communion of saints" and the "forgiveness of sins," but it depends on how one interprets those statements. The Lord's Prayer is more clearly "ortho-practical" about the practice of forgiving than the Apostle's Creed: "...and forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive those** who trespass against us."

The use of alternative creeds could correct some of this imbalance. I am not suggesting that creeds can fill the gap. They can't. Nor am I suggesting that we should give

orthopraxy equal footing in our creeds, because a creed is by definition a statement of belief and will thus always be closely linked to the teachings and beliefs of the Christian church. But there are several ways in which the central importance of practice for our faith identity can receive an upgrade in alternative creeds, especially when we mention Jesus and the Holy Spirit. How do we tell the story of Jesus? Do we reduce it to his suffering, death and resurrection or is there room for his life, compassion and care for the poor? Do we talk about the Holy Spirit mainly in the context of the church and the communion of saints or do we include the Spirit's call to a life of service, love and unselfishness?

Some of the creeds later discussed will have a paragraph, section or segment that tries to speak more clearly to Christians' desire and commitment to live out our faith in actions. This can be tricky because what "right living" means depends to some degree on the context of a community. I argue that Christians are still far less clear on the criteria for right Christian living (orthopraxy) than on a set of widely accepted Christian teachings.

A full source and analysis are included in the next chapter, but the closing paragraph in the aforementioned UMC Affirmation of Faith is a nice example of what I'm referring to:

We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord, to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth.

To summarize: The right practice of faith (orthopraxy) has always been an important part of the Christian identity and has strong roots in the Hebrew scriptures as well. The right practice of faith has been studied and pondered in the discipline of Christian ethics, at least to some extent. Yet, it appears that the strong emphasis on orthodoxy (right teaching), both in the early church and in the writings of the reformers, has created an imbalance. Throughout church history, more effort has been put into the developing the right teachings and belief systems than in a clear understanding of Christian practices. The creeds are generally not the place to change that; they are by definition statements of faith. Although the early ecumenical creeds are not concerned with orthopraxy, it is possible for alternative creeds to at least hint at core virtues and practices of the Christian faith, such as loving one's neighbor, etc.

E) Rejection of Institutions

"Now, anywhere you hear or see such a word preached, believed, confessed, and acted upon, do not doubt that the true ecclesia sancta catholica, a 'holy Christian people' must be there...." — Martin Luther, *On the Councils of the Church*¹³

As Phyllis Tickle pointed out in *Emergence Christianity*, the decline of Christian institutions is not a rejection of faith. It is a sign of our times:

Yet, one has only to look at the declining membership statistics of, for example, the Rotary Club, the Kiwanis International, the VFW, the American Legion, etc., to understand that deinstitutionalization is a new value in our times as well as a defining hallmark of Emergence Theory itself.¹⁴

Many books have been written to explain why people who describe themselves as spiritual or who are genuinely interested in Jesus are so often dead set against the idea of church or, as it is often termed, "organized religion." Dan Kimball explores the reasons why emerging generations avoid church in his book, *They Like Jesus but not the Church*. Former Episcopal priest and teacher Barbara Brown-Taylor made headlines years ago with her decision to leave parish ministry and publish her spiritual journey in a book called *Leaving the Church*. There are more reasons for this church flight phenomenon than we have room to mention here, but let us focus on the institution part. No doubt, the institutional character of the church with its layers of committees, constitutions, bylaws, conventions, and hierarchical structures is not appealing to the Millennial generation and probably already lost its appeal two or three generations prior to that. All too often, by institutional design, the church moves slowly. She invests vast resources of energy towards satisfying the requirements of the apparatus rather than engaging in visioning, innovation, spiritual practices, service and simply being a community of faith.

The article "American Religion in the Twenty-First Century" from Belief.net (quoted earlier) also has this to say about institutions:

Institutions themselves would appear to be in some peril. While the media is sometimes blamed for downplaying religion, the reality seems to be that religion is more lip service than primary force in the shaping of society's policies. None of the specialists interviewed here see religion as a major challenge to the nation's central values of getting and spending.¹⁵

The Apostle's Creed states in the third article: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints..." The Nicene Creed offers this classical formulation: "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." It may be inevitable that some

people read these passages as belief in the institution church, complete with all the hierarchical structures associated with it. Particularly the term "catholic" is bound to create that kind of confusion. Yet, it is not necessary, nor appropriate to read these passages about the "holy catholic church" in the traditional creeds as endorsements of the church's current institutional character. It is tempting to do so, for sure, and will require more education than most churches provide to facilitate a deeper understanding of the concept of church as mystical body of Christ. It will be necessary to point at the spiritual reality of the kingdom of God as something that transcends (and frequently questions) church institutions and denominations. Brother David Steind-Rast again found a way to express this beautifully:

Within the framework of my Church, I have been given glimpses of THE CHURCH. It is this CHURCH in which I profess my faith when I recite the Creed - the truly HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, a community that bursts every framework...At their best, churches can become windows through which we can glimpse, and gateways through which we can enter, Church.¹⁶

Alternative creeds can be a little bit bolder and clearer about this distinction. To their advantage, they may choose to employ a language that does not carry all the connotations of the institutional church but instead points at the mystical reality of the "invisible church." I once felt the urge to write a creed which better reflects Luther's description of the church as comprised of sinners and saints and hints both at the sinful reality and the mystical promise and presence of the church.

*I believe in Christ's humble spirit
giving birth to the holy, apostolic and universal church,
which is among us and beyond us, before us and after us.
I believe in a church comprised of sinners and saints,
imperfect and in need of grace,
yet blessed - the body of Christ.
I believe in the forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.*

To summarize: It is easy to confuse our faith in the holy catholic church with the institution we see and experience. It needs to be taught that these passages in the traditional creeds point at a greater reality, one that transcends everything we associate with the church on earth, but especially its "worldly" institutional structure. In our

traditional creeds, the church often takes on a glorious glow that stands in stark contrast to the imperfectness of the church's (and any particular church's) manifestation on earth. Alternative creeds can be clearer on expressing the mystical/spiritual reality of THE CHURCH or on the sinful reality that permeates the worldly institution known as the Church, which is under God's judgment and grace.

F) A New Appreciation of Science

"How wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know."¹⁷

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The scientific revolutions of the twentieth century have made a lasting impact on the way people think about God today, despite the fact that it hasn't entirely trickled down to the level of popular religion. Sara Maitland's work is especially relevant on this:

Science has become fashionable. From a theological point of view it has also become approachable again. While the Newtonian myth of a mechanistic universe, with its reductionist approach, dominated human imagination, there was very little that theology could say. By and large deists and theists together were forced into a relationship with the God of the Gaps, a God who inevitably got smaller and smaller...

However, the science of this century has, at least at the imaginative level (and it has to be said to the appalled fury of many scientists), reopened the floodgates. Quantum mysticism is trendy; cosmology is chic; dinosaur exhibitions are packed out...¹⁸

These notions do not just represent the musings of a few intellectually elite Christian thinkers like Maitland. If, as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle suggests, we live in a world of probabilities rather than certainties, a world in which order is established rather beautifully out of the chaos of interdependent tiny particles, there goes the traditional belief in predestination and the towering myth of a God who is "in charge" of our every move. This myth, while it may have to be revisited and redefined, is debunked in the straightforward way people have imagined it for so long. Rather, the God that emerges from these scientific findings is one who grants creation a great deal of autonomy,

participatory power and, indeed: creativity; a God who allows us to evolve rather than steering our evolution from some celestial control tower.

A nice example of how these scientific findings have influenced contemporary Christian leaders and their view of God and the universe, is provided by Doug Paggitt:

Today we know that the universe is far more beautiful, alive and interactive than the imagination of the deterministic thinkers of the 1600s could allow for. It is best not to think of fixed laws that govern the universe but rather probabilities and possibilities that are inherent in the constantly changing world. Through discoveries about everything from the smallest particle to the expanding "multiverse" (formerly referred to as universe), the notion of determinism has expired.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, we find many emerging Christian leaders trying to incorporate those types of insights into their theologies and belief systems. As they do so, it breaks open some of the dead ends of times past. The God of the Gaps, relegated to a corner altar of private religiosity, is being replaced by a more universally relevant edition. For theologians, the most fascinating result of these scientific revolutions is the inescapable conclusion that scientific explanation in this age, rather than forcing a theological retreat, is inviting theological meditation.

I mentioned earlier that all the criteria mentioned here are inter-connected. The renewed interest in science is closely related to the next item on our list, openness for mysticism and paradox, as hinted at in the earlier quote from Maitland. What would have been unimaginable in the context of 19th century science and religion, now makes perfect sense. For instance, quantum science has inspired a certain appreciation of paradox is widely accepted. Maitland writes: "Bohr's Theory of Complementarity shows us not that something can be two things at once but that two incompatible discourses can be needed to understand or describe something..."²⁰ She is referring to the still-baffling early twentieth-century discovery that light can be described either as particle or wave in any given experiment, but never both at the same time; yet, both descriptions are needed to accurately describe light. What is light? Particle or wave? We could add: Who was Jesus? God or man? The philosophical analogies on the deeper questions of science and religion are exciting.

What does all this mean for the understanding of our Christian creeds? It is relevant in at least two ways. For one, the first article of our traditional creeds professes our faith in God the creator. In light of ever-advancing scientific discoveries about our world it will always be risky to be too specific about the modalities of creation. Yet, I believe it is important to instill in the worshipping community a bolder interpretation of the "creator

of heaven and earth," one that incorporates creation's past, present and future and reaches beyond traditional gender and power concepts. How many Christians speak this part of the creed thinking of God as creator **only** in the past tense and perhaps imagining the archetype of an all-powerful male God? Of course, these misconceptions can be corrected by teaching and re-interpreting the traditional creeds. The mythical term "creator" is open for interpretation and is much more malleable than scientific terms can ever be.

Alternative creeds can emphasize the notion of continuing creation and even continuing evolution. They can openly hint at the divine mystery that undergirds the most sophisticated realities of the created world, both on the macro and the micro level. But they can also easily overreach by trying to sound too scientific.

Among others, I found Lisa Frentz's "Creed (No 7)", which we will look at in the next chapter, a nice example of a new creation language, especially in its explicit mentioning of the entire universe and its cognizance of the ongoing work of creation.

"We believe in God the Creator, who created and is creating everything: the universe, the world, the plants and animals, and us; each of us, unique, individual and beloved of God."²¹

On the other hand, I found John Morris's creed an interesting and honest attempt to incorporate scientific language in his section about creation, but I view it ultimately as overreaching (as I will explain in the next chapter).

"I believe in God, the Father of all,
who began and upholds a universe
that makes itself through evolving processes.
God is Love, granting to creation a freedom
that restricts his power."²²

To summarize: Theology has benefited from new discoveries in science, especially over the last century, relegating the defeatist "God in the gaps" approach to the past. Discoveries in physics in the early twentieth century—like Einstein's Relativity Theory and advances in the field of quantum physics—put in question Newtonian certainties and the deterministic world view that went along with it. In a multifaceted world of Paggitt's "probabilities and possibilities that are inherent in the constantly changing world," theology has been forced to re-think God once again as the one that brings unity out of chaos (Genesis 1). The term "creator," which is found in all traditional creeds, retains a mythic quality that is wonderfully malleable in our scientific world; but it probably also misleads many Christians to think of God in the old deterministic ways. Certainly,

education at the crossroads of science and religion could help shed light on an old and still very useful term: creator. In addition, alternative creeds can hint at the more dynamic picture of God that has evolved and continues to evolve.

G) An Openness for Mysticism and Paradox

*"The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all."*²³—Karl Rahner

There is a hunger in our time for genuine spirituality. This much ought to be clear from the observations and findings of contemporary Christian writers and speakers, major surveys and, not least of all, the entire "spiritual but not religious" discussion. People want the "real" experience, but they are deeply suspicious of the "officialdom" of the Christian church. The rejection of the institution and the hunger for spirituality are two sides of the same coin. The question, however, is: what is genuine spirituality?

Dom Michael King, the Abbott of an Anglican Benedictine monastery in Camperdown, Australia, reflected on Karl Rahner's famous word about the Christian of the future in a sermon on July 18, 2004: "By mysticism, Rahner explains, he does not mean some esoteric phenomenon but 'a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.'"²⁴ Worship that leads people to that place where we meet God at the heart of our existence are thriving and will be thriving. Liturgies, prayers and creeds that transport people to that place will pave the way for a rediscovery of religion in our world. I suspect that this is one of the areas where we observe a major divide between the generations. For older generations, the story told in the creeds tends to be self-explanatory and sufficient. In the focus groups that I conducted in the spring of 2016, I was greeted with a lot of contentment regarding the question of whether the Apostle's Creed adequately describes the Christian faith. When confronted with more contemporary creeds that employed the language of paradox and mystery in unfamiliar ways, the same people often could not relate. Mystery and paradox seem to be much more accessible and meaningful to the younger generations.

Here is an example of a Christian new age writer, July Clawson, who blogs at ***onehandclapping***, a Zen inspired name. In her 2008 entry, "The Power of Paradox," she writes:

Faith is not about knowledge—what we know or how we know it, it is about following in the footsteps of a fool. Jesus was a fool in the eyes of the world. He has been accredited with ushering in an upside-down kingdom—where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. He cared for those whom society cast aside, he instructed us to love our enemies, he called the underdogs blessed. By anyone's standards he was a fool. And he called us

to follow him. As many have stated recently, this isn't about affirming a secret set of knowledge but about entering into a way of life. It is about following the fool, being content in mystery, affirm[ing] the power of paradox, and turning the world upside-down.²⁵

For a creedal church, paradox and mystery should be nothing new at all. The Nicene Creed is full of wonderfully paradox statements that touch on some of the deepest foundations of the Christian faith. Traditional Christology can only be expressed in the language of paradox, with a sense of mystery surrounding it. Some of the modern statements of faith try to be overly precise and one-dimensional and shy away from the use of paradoxes, mostly to their own detriment. We will see in the following chapter to what extent alternative creeds include the language of paradox.

To summarize: Various degrees of appreciation for mysticism and paradox may well be something that sets generations apart, at least in the Protestant world, which has traditionally valued rationalism over mysticism. While these "mystical elements" seem to be less of an important faith component for traditional Christians, it can offer a compass for people growing up in a complex and often contradictory world. The ancient creeds and the sacramental dimension of liturgical worship point to the spiritual presence of God through paradox and mystery. I am not sure there is a need to emphasize this any more than what's already expressed in the Nicene Creed. Perhaps, a few fresh expressions in alternative creeds might speak to spiritual seekers and Millennial Christians in new and inspiring ways.

Notes:

¹ Karl Rahner, *Theol. Invent. XX*, p. 149.

² Quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo*, page 488.

³ <http://www.beliefnet.com/news/2000/03/american-religion-in-the-21st-century.aspx?p=3>, accessed May 21, 2016.

⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, pages 129f. and 164f.

⁵ Nathan Colquhoun, "The Bible and Propositional Truth Claims," May 18, 2013.

<http://www.nathancolquhoun.com/2013/05/18/the-bible-and-propositional-truth-claims>.

⁶ Dr. John H. Armstrong, posted on March 18, 2006, accessed August 22, 2016, http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john_h_armstrong_/2006/03/how_important_i.html.

⁷ See John H. Armstrong, posted on March 18, 2006, accessed August 22, 2016:

"I also heard, since arriving in Sacramento, that a well-known minister recently made reference to me, by name, in a large public setting by expressing his concerns that I was denying "propositional truth." This whole debate rather amuses me. And it also amazes me since it openly displays how we have adopted linguistically loaded terms, often with little understanding of their origin and/or meaning, and then built castles upon these terms that we will fight for against all who challenge our well-built (?) castles."

⁸ Dr. John H. Armstrong, posted on March 18, 2006, accessed August 22, 2016, http://johnharmstrong.typepad.com/john_h_armstrong_/2006/03/how_important_i.html.

- ⁹ Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words*, p. 128.
- ¹⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots*, p. 173.
- ¹¹ <http://www.churchofgod.org/beliefs/declaration-of-faith>, accessed June 10, 2016.
- ¹² Michael Beck, posted 6-23-2006, <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2006/06/on-being-practicing-christian.html>, accessed June 12, 2016.
- ¹³ Martin Luther, Martin Luther (1914). "On the Councils and the Church". *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden ...* . Vol 50. Weimar: H. Böhlau.
- ¹⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, p. 130.
- ¹⁵ ³ <http://www.beliefnet.com/news/2000/03/american-religion-in-the-21st-century.aspx?p=3>, accessed May 21, 2016.
- ¹⁶ Brother David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words*, p. 140.
- ¹⁷ Letter to Eberhard Bethge, 29 May 1944, p. 310–312 in *Letters and Papers from Prison* edited by Eberhard Bethge, translated by Reginald H. Fuller. Touchstone, 1997; Translation of Widerstand und Ergebung Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1970.
- ¹⁸ Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God*, p. 26 and 27.
- ¹⁹ Doug Paggitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, p. 102.
- ²⁰ Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God*, p. 63.
- ²¹ Lisa Frenz, Creed Number 7 on her website, "Lisa's Liturgies," at <https://sites.google.com/site/lisaliturgies/home>, accessed June 13, 2016.
- ²² John Morris, *Contemporary Creed*, p. 20.
- ²³ Karl Rahner, *Theol. Invent. XX*, 149.
- ²⁴ <https://cthornby.wordpress.com/2008/01/09/will-the-christian-of-the-future-by-a-mystic>, accessed July 7, 2016.
- ²⁵ <http://julieclawson.com/2008/01/15/the-power-of-paradox>, accessed July 7, 2016.

V. Alternative General Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

Let us now look at some alternative creeds. I will introduce each creed and provide background information about the author or community behind it, followed by a brief analysis and critique. I will not pretend that my critique is objective, but will try to provide a fair, thoughtful and considerate assessment.

1) "A Creed" by Lisa Frenz (Number 7)

About the Author:

Lisa Frenz is a musician with a BA in Voice Performance from the Conservatory of Music, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California. According to her bio, "she never thought to end up as choir director/music director at a church, but she did that for over 30 years."

Starting in the 1980s, she also wrote prayers, litanies and other liturgical pieces. Many of these worship resources were written for a small Lutheran church in Portland, Oregon, combining elements of traditional Lutheran liturgy with new wording, rituals, etc. to meet the needs of a modern worshiping congregation.

Her website states that she was the first outside writer for *Creative Communications for the Parish*. She published with them for almost ten years and continues to write, "looking for new and unique ways to express her faith in a community setting."

The Creed (Listed as Number 7 on her website)¹

We believe in God the Creator, who created and is creating everything: the universe, the world, the plants and animals, and us; each of us, unique, individual and beloved of God.

We believe in God the Christ, who saved and is saving everything: the universe, the world, the plants and animals, and us: each of us; unique, individual and beloved of the Christ.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who guided and is guiding everything: the universe, the world, the plants and animals, and us; each of us, unique, individual and beloved of the Spirit.

We believe that this one God in three persons, is present among us, working directly in our lives and the lives of all who are born into this world, striving to bring us back

*into harmony with all creation and with God: forgiving, healing, touching everyone, never rejecting any who willingly receive this freely offered gift of love and grace and eternal life. **Amen.***

Analysis and Critique:

There is a lot to love about this creed. It uses gender neutral language when referring to God but keeps the Trinitarian structure of the traditional creeds fully intact. It appeals to all those who care about the environment or are drawn to creation spirituality. It formulates a faith that goes beyond the human domination narrative of past Christian creation theologies. In this creed, not only has everything been created by God; in addition, all of creation has been saved by Christ; all of creation is guided by the spirit of God. Paul's beautiful inclusion of creation in the act of salvation in Romans 8 immediately comes to mind: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8: 22–23, NIV).

The consistency of this creed is appealing. It consistently describes God's action in the past tense and in the continued present tense. The repeated, litany-like mentioning of the entire created world as object of God's loving action brings emphasis to the inclusive vision of this creed.

In a fourth paragraph, humanity enters the focus of this creed, explaining how the triune God works salvation into the lives of individuals and communities. Although it states that God is working directly in the lives "of all who are born into this world," thus including animals and micro-organisms, I presume that this closing part of the creed is mostly about the descendants of Adam and Eve. God is the one who brings us back into harmony with creation and creator through God's forgiving, healing and touching presence. In an elegant way it also allows us to read these parts participatory: as God works in us, we become the forgiving, healing, touching presence in the lives of others and in the life of creation.

All in all, I love this creed and think it is a satisfying alternative, unless you are looking for a traditional creed with all the familiar elements. Many parts of the Apostle's Creed and many important aspects of traditional Christian teachings are not found in this alternative creed. Here is a brief list of major statements that are missing:

- No mentioning of Jesus' birth, life, suffering death and resurrection.
- No reference to the after-life or other developed forms of eschatology

- No mentioning of or belief in the Church

So, there is quite a bit of substance missing in this creed: no Christology, no Eschatology, no Ecclesiology. In addition, it appears that the creed is more about the cosmic Christ than the historical Jesus. And God's activity is entirely focused on the created world. That's where it begins and that's also where it ends. Although, it needs to be said, it doesn't really end...

It surprises me that these omissions do not bother me much. In my view this creed is a wonderful example of a contemporary statement of faith that does not replace the more theologically complete creeds of old, but rather complements them. I look at this work not as a great summary of the Christian faith but rather a summary of what Christians may need to focus on in the twenty-first century. It beautifully explores and celebrates an aspect of our faith that is missing in our traditional creeds. It gives expression to our increasing awareness about the interconnectedness of all life. This creed would fit particularly well into a creation themed worship service or could serve as a signature creed of Christian communities that have chosen to work deliberately on inclusiveness. I would not hesitate to use this creed myself in certain worship contexts and I think it benefits from the fact that it doesn't even try to incorporate the entire weight of Christian theology in these few paragraphs. It is this courage to be selective, which, I believe, benefits most alternative creeds.

2) "My Creed" - by John Morris

About the Author:

Born in 1937 in the UK, John Morris, MA, M.Ed, PGCE, PhD, was a teacher and lecturer for over thirty years before being ordained as an Anglican clergyman in 1995. He assisted three rural parishes in Hampshire, UK for six years while being chaplain of Twyford School for eleven. John Morris writes about his creed:

My 100-word creed, composed in 1999, was not written to replace the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. They omit the problem of suffering which keeps many from any religious belief: "Where is God in a world of natural disasters?"—including children like my grandson, Daniel, born profoundly handicapped in 1999, and who stays with my wife and me on alternate weekends and holidays. My creed hints at an answer developed at length in the book.²

*I believe in God, the Father of all,
who began and upholds a universe
that makes itself through evolving processes.
God is Love, granting to creation a freedom
that restricts his power.*

*Through his Son Jesus
this self-giving God rescued us and
showed us what he is like:
loving in life and death;
sharing our pain;
suffering the consequences of our sin;
offering forgiveness.*

*Jesus died for us but was raised by God
and now lives with us through his Spirit
to build God's kingdom of unselfish love
and lead us, as our judge and Savior,
to eternity with him.*

Analysis and Critique:

When I introduced this creed to groups of parishioners from different churches in the spring focus group series, people frequently stumbled over two expressions: the notion that God restricts his power and the phrase that the universe "makes itself through evolving processes." (end of first paragraph) The pairing of judge and Savior in the final paragraph also faced resistance.

It helps to know where this author is coming from and what he's trying to achieve. His book, *Contemporary Creed*, explores many questions that inquisitive minds and skeptics may have about the Christian faith. In about two hundred pages, it wrestles with a great range of issues in the old English tradition of Anselm of Canterbury: *fides quærens intellectum*, faith seeking reason. It introduces and answers theological riddles such as, "Can evil serve any useful function?"; "Why was Jesus baptized?"; "What is good about Good Friday?" and lots more, including questions about creation and evolution. The creed is positioned as a prelude to the book and the author remarks about it: "I wrote it for school leavers and parents as a summary of their years in chapel, given with their Gideon's New Testament...The creed forms the spine of the book, backed up by plentiful biblical references."³

The author's biggest quest is trying to make sense of the problem of human suffering and how it can be reconciled with the Christian faith. As a grandfather of a severely handicapped child this wasn't an abstract problem for Morris but rather a personal matter that would not be settled easily. We will see that this problem and Morris' attempts to make sense of it have shaped this creed and its theological messages.

The overall tone of "My Creed" is markedly rational. At times the author tries to explain too much and, predictably, falls short. For instance, while I appreciate Morris' honest attempt at incorporating evolution language in the statements about creation, the result is not satisfactory.

The uneasy union between religious and scientific language bleeds through right from the start, introducing a God who "began and upholds a universe that makes itself through evolving processes." The beginning of this statement offers a progression from the old deist model of a clockmaker universe (among eighteenth century deists, God was viewed as a clockmaker who made the world and then basically let it tick), by acknowledging the ongoing presence of God who not only began but also "upholds the universe." Although this introduces immanent theology, the continuation of the line sounds like a mere upgrade of the original clockmaker model: a more intelligent clock, one that is able to "evolve by itself."

I cannot agree with this approach. If God is behind the "evolving processes," it sounds like he/she is a production manager, not an image that is exactly an upgrade over the mythical image of the creator. It almost feels as if Morris felt compelled to employ evolutionary over creation language, which is not helpful in the end-result. Also, despite the phrase "upholds," this paragraph does not evoke a feeling for God's presence in creation. That's why the old clockmaker model comes to mind and with it an antiquated mechanistic world view. Unfortunately, despite his attempt to reconcile creation with modern science in so many words, we are left with religion and science as two different world views that coexist in disharmony and tend to leave one another impoverished.

The sense of an abandoned, autonomous creation (which to evoke I believe was not the author's intent) is only strengthened with the next statement: "God is love, granting to creation a freedom that restricts his power." The statement, strange as it sounds to more traditional ears, makes sense from the vantage point of someone who is trying to reconcile human suffering and the belief in a loving God. From a logical point of view, if God granted creation freedom to develop, God has by definition restricted his/her own power. This sort of freedom sheds light on the considerable chance element in life (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle) and thus the probability of "innocent" suffering. Still, like the people in my focus groups, I too stumble over the phrase "a freedom that restricts

his power." I wonder whether this tension would better stand unexplained, rather than being rationalized. I also wonder whether the language of paradox would be more helpful here, the notion that God is powerful and at the same time to some degree powerless. Can we explain this tension in any meaningful statement of short length? Can we explain it at all?

The creed on the whole lacks poetic depth that could reach the spiritual imagination of those who speak it. Evolution and free will factor in as ways to offer an explanation (sort of) for the suffering of human beings. As John Morris explains in his book:

If...God took the risk of endowing all matter in our expanding universe with the freedom to be and become, exploration, misadventure, and waste are introduced...In the continuing process of creation and recreation he is not only the inventor and repairer, he is also the undertaker and midwife engaged in the cremation and birth of stars and species.⁴

Finally, this creed, despite its threefold structure, is not Trinitarian. It follows the Trinitarian sequence superficially, but does not give each "person" of the Trinity creedal affirmation. Jesus and the Spirit are God's way of expressing himself. In traditional theology, this is called modalism, one of the many ways in which the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity can be slightly misunderstood.

John Morris calls this "My Creed," and that is probably a good way of titling it, as it sums up his many years of deep probing into the meaning of the Christian faith against some daunting questions and as it hints at some of the answers he has come up with, especially regarding the problem of human suffering. But as a spoken creed for a church community it remains problematic. Many of its statements may cause confusion rather than achieving a deepening of one's faith and spiritual life.

3) A Celtic Creed⁵

Introduction:

This creed/affirmation appears on page 38 of the current Iona Abbey Worship Book (Wild Goose Publications). It was already published in the Iona Community Worship Book from 1991. Iona is a neo-monastic community with a unique history and a special mission in contemporary Christianity.

According to their official website, the Iona Community:

was founded in Glasgow and Iona in 1938 by George MacLeod, minister, visionary and prophetic witness for peace, in the context of the poverty and

despair of the Depression. From a dockland parish in Govan, Glasgow, he took unemployed skilled craftsmen and young trainee clergy to Iona to rebuild both the monastic quarters of the mediaeval abbey and the common life by working and living together, sharing skills and effort as well as joys and achievement. That original task became a sign of hopeful rebuilding of community in Scotland and beyond. The experience shaped—and continues to shape—the practice and principles of the Iona Community.⁶

The community has published many books with liturgies, prayers and worship materials, including alternative creeds. This is what Gail Ullrich, Administrator of Iona's Wild Goose Resource Group, writes about the origin of this Celtic Creed:

Much of the material in the Worship Book is a collaborative effort by members of the resident group on the island and the wider membership of the Community. Some of it, such as the Celtic Evening Liturgy, may have its origin in or have been inspired by older texts, but we believe these two creeds were original. My colleague has a record that 'We believe in God above us, maker and sustainer of all life' was written by Philip Newell...⁷

The current Iona Abbey Worship Book explains Iona's approach to worship and contextual liturgy thus:

The services in this book reflect important aspects of what the Iona Community believes about worship.

We owe our very existence as a community to the central Gospel conviction that worship is all that we are and all that we do. Either everything we do is an offering to God, or nothing. We may not pick and choose.

Our whole life, we believe, is a search for wholeness. We desire to be fully human, with no division into the 'sacred' and the 'secular.' We desire to be fully present to God, who is fully present to us, whether in our neighbor or in the political and social activity of the world around us, whether in the field of culture or of economics, and whether in prayer and praise together or in the very centre and soul of our being...

On Iona, our common life is fed from many sources. The past is all around us. We are the inheritors of the Celtic tradition, with its deep sense of Jesus as the head of all, and of God's glory in all of creation. So we use prayers from the Celtic Church for welcome, for work, and in expressing the needs of the world. We are the inheritors of the Benedictine tradition, with its conviction that 'to work is to pray,' its commitment to hospitality, and its sense of order, all reflected in our service and our lifestyle. And we are the inheritors of the tradition of the Reformers, with their evangelical zeal, their call to commitment, and their deep understanding of the continuing

challenge to every generation to find 'new ways to touch the hearts of all.'
All this, we hope, you will find in how we pray and work on Iona.⁸

A Celtic Creed

*We believe in God above us, maker and sustainer of all life,
of sun and moon, of water and earth, of male and female.*

*We believe in God beside us, Jesus Christ, the word made flesh,
born of a woman, servant of the poor, tortured and nailed to a tree.
A man of sorrows, he died forsaken.
He descended into the earth to the place of death.
On the third day he rose from the tomb.
He ascended into heaven, to be everywhere present,
and His kingdom will come on earth.*

*We believe in God within us, the Holy Spirit of Pentecostal fire,
life-giving breath of the Church, Spirit of healing and forgiveness,
source of resurrection and of eternal life.
Amen*

Analysis and Critique:

This creed was one of the favorites among the people in the focus groups and was well received even by those who strongly identified with the Apostle's Creed. Its rightful place in Celtic spirituality is easily identifiable. There is a wonderful earthiness about this creed. In the first paragraph, it paints a picture of creation with beautiful, inclusive images that invite meditation. The pairings of sun and moon, water and earth, male and female are more than just aesthetically pleasing; each pairing expresses important aspects of creation spirituality:

Sun and Moon: Fostering appreciation for both day and night, light and darkness in our spiritual lives. In the modern age we have so often neglected or rejected lunar spirituality, as Barbara Brown Taylor recently emphasized and as Matthew Fox pointed out decades ago.

... I have been given the gift of lunar spirituality, in which the divine light available to me waxes and wanes with the season. When I go out on my porch at night, the moon never looks the same way twice. Some nights it is as round and bright as a headlight; other nights it is thinner than the sickle hanging in my garage. Some nights it is high in the sky, and other nights low over the mountains. Some nights it is altogether gone, leaving a

vast web of stars that are brighter in its absence. All in all, the moon is a truer mirror for my soul than the sun that looks the same way every day.⁹

The womb was dark and not fearful. These are our origins, the very holy origin of our original being, our original blessedness. There is no underestimating the importance of our meditating on our dark and silent origins if we are to make touch with our spiritual depths. The sun does not penetrate all of space. Much of space is dark. Much of the birth of the cosmos itself was done in the dark—the sun has not always existed.¹⁰

Water and Earth: Both water and earth are important biblical images and describe different aspects of the same faith. On the one hand faith is radical trust and risk (water), on the other hand it is about rootedness and connection (earth).

Male and Female: It is of course nice and deeply satisfactory that the two genders are explicitly mentioned in this creed. It also reminds us of the polarity of all created life and the harmony we find when these poles are reconciled.

The earthiness continues in the second paragraph. This creed paints a supremely humble, human picture of Jesus and avoids some of the mythic, triumphant overtones that frequently cause people to stumble (Virgin Birth, Hell, "seated at the right hand of the Father"). The creed states the obvious—born of a woman—thus evoking a tone of general appreciation for the role of women in Jesus' life and women in general, rather than singling out Mary and placing the "Virgin" on a pedestal. It calls the suffering of Jesus torture and describes him as a "man of sorrows" who died "forsaken." It's easy to recognize in these words implied solidarity with all people who are suffering, tortured and forsaken in contemporary society. Thus, this creed brings the compassion of Christ closer to us, without trying to be overly "contemporary" in language or style. Finally, the language about the resurrection softens the traditional supernatural narrative. He "rose from the tomb" sounds like an awakening rather than a mythic triumph over the defeat of death. The Ascension to Heaven leads to Christ's presence everywhere and means his kingdom is coming to earth, drawing a sharp contrast to any notions of heaven as separated from earth. In Celtic spirituality, as in the Hebrew tradition, heaven and earth belong fundamentally together.

The third paragraph is heavy on symbols and short on ecclesiastical terminology. The images "Pentecostal fire" and "life-giving breath" evoke mystical energy rather than belief

in an institution ("holy catholic church") or certain theological constructs associated with the Holy Spirit ("resurrection of the dead"; "life everlasting").

In my opinion this creed handles Trinitarian theology beautifully by introducing each "person" as God above us, God beside us and God within us. Not only can people relate to this language quite easily, each of those expressions also point to biblical stories, names or expressions. I also recognize a distant connection to Luther's Consubstantiation concept. In his Eucharistic theology, he famously coined the expression that Christ is present "in, with and under the elements," which also has a Trinitarian ring to it and sounds quite similar.

For those who are interested in clear theological statements regarding Incarnation, Resurrection, Ascension and Life after Death, this creed will be disappointing and weak. Its strength can also be considered its weakness: it stays earthy throughout; its trajectory always comes back to earth, to the here and now. I could see this creed as a nice entryway to the Christian faith for people who are not religious, for whom mythical concepts are difficult to digest. As mentioned before, this is a "down to earth" creed with very strong connections to the created world and images that invite further meditation and nourishment of the soul. It offers the best of the Celtic tradition.

4) Modern Creed by Stuart Kurtz

About the Author:

Stuart Kurtz is a blogger and professor of education in Illinois. He blogs at Eirene-The Civics of the Kingdom of God. This is how he introduced his attempt at a modern creed:

I've thought for a while that this might be a good time to write a new creed. The existing creeds were written at a times when there was active controversy over what they confessed, and were biased by those controversies. And all of the creeds say far too little about the Holy Spirit.

Anyway, at a Church retreat yesterday, we were all invited to write a creed. Unsurprisingly, an exercise that seemed impossible given just a summer was easily completed in the twenty minutes allotted. I don't claim that the following creed is any sort of final word, and I would welcome suggestions as to how to improve it.¹¹

*I believe in God the Father,
source of all life,
source of all love,
creator of the Universe
and all that is in it,
including me.*

*I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully divine,
the only begotten son of the Father
whose witness and sacrifice saves the Universe,
and all that is in it,
including me.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
God acting in the world,
the voice of the prophets,
who animates the Universe
and all that is in it,
including me.*

*These three are one God,
the only God,
my God.*

*I believe in the communion of saints,
the Church of the Father, Son, and Spirit,
through which we are called to love one another
as God loves us,
to find identity and unity through baptism of
water and spirit
fellowship, remembrance, and forgiveness*

through Eucharist, and to seek the life eternal.

Analysis and Critique:

This is a very admirable attempt, particularly given the short time in which it was put together. I am especially drawn to the lines "and all that is in it, including me," repeated after each of the first three paragraphs, an elegant technique to reiterate both the cosmic and personal dimension of faith, providing a nice structural unity. In fact, I very much like the first three paragraphs, but I am not enamored with the additions of paragraphs four and five. The fourth paragraph is intriguing in its brief affirmation of Christian Trinitarian theology and could very well spell the conclusion of this creed. The final paragraph feels like a haphazard and somewhat unnecessary addendum.

Looking at the first three paragraphs, the core of this creed, one notices the broad strokes with which the Trinitarian faith unfolds before the reader. I do not dislike the brevity and narrative scarcity, which sets it apart from the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds. The message is like a theological concentrate, focusing on the main essentials of our faith without many of the statements that the early Church felt compelled to include because of the competing teachings of the time. This creed sticks to the bare bones of Christianity: belief in a God who creates, saves and animates the world—from the infinite universe down to the individual person, me.

So long as one understands this minimalist approach and doesn't expect every Christian teaching to be represented here, this creed can be appreciated for what it is: a short Christian Creed that sticks to the absolute essentials. It has a modern, light feel to it; at the same time, the statements that are being made are profound and not watered down. It also has a nice flow to it—until paragraphs four and five.

The fifth paragraph is not only formally but also theologically problematic. Kurtz offers in his comment that he felt the traditional creeds say far too little about the Holy Spirit. My suspicion is that he tried to squeeze in what he felt was missing in this additional (fifth) paragraph. The problem is: it is alienated in form and content from the neat Trinitarian structure of the first three paragraphs. One is almost left to wonder whether the community of saints is a fourth expression of God, rather than an outflow of the Holy Spirit. I appreciate the significance of the statements that Kurtz includes in the final paragraph. They touch on some of the most important Christian teachings: Jesus' mandate that we love one another as he loved us (John 12); Christian unity in one Faith, one Baptism, one Lord (Ephesians 4) and the Eucharist as the visible expression of our

unity in Christ. All these are important hallmarks of the church and at the same time subject to our faith, because these things are never fully realized on earth. Yet, the fifth paragraph, as one responder in my focus groups aptly remarked, feels "like the P.S. in a letter." If the author needed to include these statements, he should have found a way to include them in the first three paragraphs instead of adding them at the end, which only takes away from the beautiful harmony he created in the first part of this creed.

5) A Short Christian Creed

*We believe in God, the Creator!
Maker of everything,
Author of the Universe,
And Mystery behind every matter.*

*We believe in Jesus Christ!
God from God, Light from Light, true God and true human,
One with the Creator.
He is the Word made flesh and the Savior of all creation.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit!
Breath of God moving among us,
One with the Creator and one with Christ,
He is our Guide and the Mentor of all creation.*

Amen.

Introduction, Analysis and Critique:

I wrote this creed several years ago. I will of course not attempt to provide a critique and analysis of my own work, but will restrict myself to explaining why I wrote it and what I think it offers and doesn't offer.

First, I wrote it because parts of the Nicene Creed have always spoken to me in powerful ways. It's easy to see which parts I mean: "God from God, Light from Light, true God and true human..." These classical formulations regarding Christ's nature express the essence of the mystery of Christ, one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith. At the same time, I often find the Nicene Creed a bit long and convoluted for ordinary Sunday use. I'm afraid this beautiful language tends to get lost among all the other parts of the

Nicene creed and doesn't get nearly the exposure it deserves in many Protestant churches because the Nicene is such a "high church" creed.

So, my goal was to shorten and condense radically. The result is a non-narrative creed that doesn't incorporate or even hint at all the Christian teachings that are traditionally featured in creeds. I tried to keep all three paragraphs at about the same length, following the familiar Trinitarian structure. This meant that the second article was cut short. There is no Jesus narrative in this creed, no mentioning of his suffering, death and resurrection. What this creed offers is a brief ontological synopsis of the Christian faith, our belief in one God who creates, saves and renews the entire universe. It's a macroscopic creed that paints our theology in broad strokes and doesn't get into the details of the salvation story.

Because of its brevity and theological minimalism, I think this creed can be a nice option for worship communities that may not otherwise use a creed or for worship settings that try to be more casual. The simple outline of faith and its non-engagement with the more "loaded" parts of the traditional creeds (Virgin Birth, Judgment, Holy catholic church, etc.) makes it, I hope, more accessible, acceptable and intriguing to doubters and seekers.

6) UMC Modern Affirmation

Introduction

According to the All Experts website, these are the origins of the creed:

"The Modern Affirmation", which is found at 885 in the back of the current UM Hymnal, can also be found in both hymnals of the prior Methodist church dating from 1966 and 1935. Before that, the "Modern Affirmation" first appeared in 1932 in the "Book of Service" of the Methodist Episcopal Church (in the North). It was written by Professor Edwin Lewis (1881–1959), who was a well-known and respected Methodist Theologian and Professor of Theology at Drew University in New Jersey.

A product of the Boston Personalist movement in early 20th century liberal theology, he rebelled against the movement and "rediscovered the bible" while editing the "Abingdon Bible Commentary" in the late 1920s. In his 1934 book: "A Christian Manifesto," professor Lewis offered a harsh criticism of "modernism," and of the liberal theological establishment within the Methodist Episcopal Church in particular. In its place he reaffirmed the importance of many of the classical Christian doctrinal positions, like the transcendence of God, the fallen state of humanity, the Divinity of Jesus

Christ, and the forensic and objective concepts within substitutionary atonement.

Lewis' "Modern Affirmation," found in our UM Hymnals today, reflects this conservative movement within Lewis' thinking during this period. As such, this Affirmation's importance is beyond estimation because it impacted the theological development of a whole generation of Methodist Theologians, including Michalson, Outler, and Oden.¹²

Modern Affirmation

We believe in God the Father, infinite in wisdom, power and love, whose mercy is over all his works, and whose will is ever directed to his children's good.

We believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, the ground of our hope, and the promise of our deliverance from sin and death.

We believe in the Holy Spirit as the divine presence in our lives, whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ, and find strength and help in time of need.

We believe that this faith should manifest itself in the service of love as set forth in the example of our blessed Lord, to the end that the kingdom of God may come upon the earth.

Amen.

Analysis and Critique:

This creed was generally well received among parishioners in the focus groups, despite, like the Short Christian Creed, leaving out many of the traditional elements like the Jesus narrative, the Virgin Birth, the holy catholic church, etc. What it does very well is incorporating the importance of God's grace and love in the credal formulation. It does so without adding a lot of extra paragraphs and addendum.

This creed follows the traditional Trinitarian structure. It offers some interesting alternative formulations which are worth considering. For instance, in the first paragraph it avoids the oft-controversial phrase "Almighty" and replaces it with "infinite in wisdom, power and love," thus balancing the tougher attribute of power with softer qualities such as love and wisdom, creating a more wholesome image of God. The addition of other divine attributes of biblical origin continues in the same sentence: "whose mercy is over

all his works and whose will is ever directed to his children's good." The emphasis on "all his works" allows for explicit mentioning of God's interest in the welfare of his human children without the message becoming anthropocentric. The tone of the paragraph reminds me of the statement in 1 John 1:5: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Although I appreciate the positive message, I also find it a bit problematic, in the same way I sometimes find John's dualism problematic. Does this reflect the bulk of the biblical witness? Is there not more mystery (and a bit more darkness) surrounding God in the stories of the Bible? I personally prefer creedal statements that leave more room for individual interpretation and don't define God as tightly.

The second paragraph is short. It offers two main images for Jesus: "gift of the father's unfailing grace" and "the ground of our hope." I find the pairing a bit odd and the images not quite satisfactory. While the first expression succeeds in its effort to incorporate God's unfailing grace in the creed, it becomes more a statement about the nature of the Father than Jesus. I also don't think that "gift" is a strong enough term for what Jesus means to Christians. And the second expression, "ground of our hope," seems to come out of nowhere. I don't disagree with it. But why is Jesus ground of our hope? The images in this part of the creed come fast and unexpected. I think they will be appreciated by Christian insiders who know the story, able to connect the missing dots, but they may be a bit confusing to others. The expression "promise of our deliverance from sin and death" only adds to the line of indirect expressions, which to me could be worded a lot more directly. Isn't Jesus more than a mere promise to us? Although the second paragraph begins with the powerful "Son of God and Son of man," the continuing images reveal Jesus only as a messenger who holds the keys to our salvation, but one is left to wonder: does he deliver? Or does his delivery depend on the strength of our faith? (Pelagius nods his head here!) That would be totally unacceptable to me in theological terms.

The third paragraph continues this line of indirect faith speech. Again, I am struck by the expression "whereby we are kept in perpetual remembrance of the truth of Christ." Is this a flowery way of saying that the spirit's job is to remind us of the teachings of Christ? Or will the Spirit connect us with Christ directly? Or perhaps just with the truth about Christ? I find the expression too complicated, as if connecting with Christ through the spirit, one needs to go through stages of remembrance and truth acknowledgment. It only strengthens my suspicion that the author makes salvation depend on the spiritual and intellectual practices of those who confess it.

The final paragraph is a nice addition because it includes the response of the faith community in acts of service and love as an integral part of our faith. This is a decidedly modern approach, one that is not found in the ancient creeds, adding an important element to the profession of our faith (a point I discuss in depth in the paragraph on orthopraxy over orthodoxy).

There is no eschatology in this creed.

7) A “Flemish Lutheran” Creed

Introduction:

The title of the last creed to be examined in this section is misleading, suggesting that it represents a Flemish Lutheran tradition, which is not the case. Protestants are a minority in Belgium and Lutherans are a yet smaller segment within that Protestant group. In terms of religion, Belgium is mostly Roman Catholic and a very secular country. This creed was written by a pastor and blogger named Jo Jan Vandenheede. He has served in a Lutheran congregation in Belgium and now leads a parish in Liverpool, England, working amongst small Lutheran minorities in both countries. On his website, he introduces himself:

I was born and raised in Flanders (northern Belgium) and became actively interested in religion at the age of 15. I was baptised Reformed, confirmed Lutheran while studying in London, and worshipped with an Anglican congregation in my beloved city of Ghent.

These are my thoughts and experiences connected to life and religion, theology and parish life, and ordained ministry...Disclaimer: These are my own personal opinions and stories, they do not necessarily reflect the opinions of my church.¹³

I emailed Jo Jan and asked him about the origins of this creed and whether there are aspects of it that are distinctly Flemish. He responded in an email on October 11, 2016: “First of all, there's not really anything distinctly Flemish about the Creed; Protestantism in Flanders tends to be Dutch influenced, and it either doesn't use any Creed in the service or a modernised version.” I also asked him why he wrote the creed. He answered in the same email:

I wrote it because I felt it. I had seen other creeds, and I felt inspired to give it a go, and I had fun doing it, I really enjoyed it. I tried to tie in 'modern' vocabulary with 'traditional' wording because I think it's important

that we realise what is meant by those traditional terms. This way we can use both, hopefully people will be inspired to use their own synonyms. I feel that many of the modern expressions in liturgy, not just creedal, lack the poetry of the traditional wording but obviously the vocabulary very often if not in most cases doesn't actually mean anything to people today or the meaning has shifted, as language does. It's looking for that balance, while staying true to the doctrinal and confessional basics.¹⁴

A "Flemish Lutheran" Creed

*We express our faith in the Source, Abba Father and Mother Hen;
concerned and engaged with all that is;
the Author of that which we are all part of,
and of that which is beyond us all.*

*We express our faith in the Only Child, Prince and Pauper;
before, after and outside time, but also a fixed point in human history.
Born from the Maker's overshadowing, just like the heavenly;
born of Mother Miriam, just like the earthly.
Many had longed for this in stories and writing.
He did come down to us; lived, loved and cried with us.
To return hope and life to us, He overcame mockery, pain and a Roman execution for us.
For us He went into the deep and dispelled the darkness.
Life won, death lost.
Ever since that first day of the week, we share in His royalty and priesthood.
From the seat of compassion, He will return to speak justly and bring eternity.*

*We express our faith in the Link, Invigorator;
speaking in new ways in every generation;
Inspirer of women and men throughout all ages and in all places.
And in the congregation, many bodies in the Body;
with word and water, bread and wine; undivided,
blessed, universal and witnessing.
And in the gathering of saints and sinners, human and angelic;
at times celebrating, at times grieving.
And in the pardon that knows no limits and recognises no boundaries.
And in the existence after this one in a new frame.*

*And in the blessedness and wholeness restored,
blissfully aware and equally blissfully at peace.*

Analysis and Critique:

This creed is cumbersome to read. I wonder whether some of it is due to translation issues and the different meanings of images in different cultures. That's an added concern whenever creeds are translated and/or imported from other places. I appreciate this creed's attempt to incorporate images for both genders; I just don't like the way it's done. I also give credit to the attempt to include other, often neglected, biblical imagery (Mother Hen, overshadowing, etc.) and to be generally sensitive to gender equality ("Inspirer of women and men throughout the ages..."); I just don't like the way it's composed and expressed. I could go on like that. The biggest annoyance in this statement of faith is the odd pairing of modern and ancient language. The problem is that the modern phrases are not paired with language that's familiar to Christians, at least not in this country, but with ancient expressions that are just as unfamiliar to us as the newer terminology. The result is that people have very little to connect to. And it's not only the disconnect between old and new language but also the untidy mixture of poetic and abstract language. Few pairings seem to belong together. It seems as if they are randomly mixed and matched. Take for instance this passage: "We express our faith in the Only Child, Prince and Pauper; before, after and outside time, but also a fixed point in human history." "Prince and pauper" is poetic language. The expression is at home in fairytales and belongs to a distant time-period. It's not commonly found in either contemporary or biblical language. "Fixed point in human history" on the other hand sounds overly abstract and technical, as if the reader had a graph in mind. It is this wild mixing and matching which makes this creed so aloof and difficult to relate to.

Each of the three paragraphs, structured along the lines of the traditional Trinitarian model, are led by the phrase, "We express our belief in..." This way of leading into a creed reveals modern consciousness. It suggests subtly that what we believe is our choice in this modern marketplace of religion. It diminishes the emphasis on the biblical faith tradition and instead draws attention to the people who are confessing and the choices they make.

Each expression of the Trinity is introduced in different, non-traditional language, but it's hard to view the language an upgrade over the older, more familiar expressions. Especially the introduction of the Holy Spirit as "Link" and "Invigorator" sounds strange. The term "link" is probably used most commonly in computer language and "invigorator"

sounds like a remedy out of the medicine cabinet—again: wild mixing and matching of expressions that have little in common and leave most readers in the dust.

I also wonder about the theological implications of the syntax in the third article. In the Apostle's Creed, several articles of faith are incorporated in the paragraph about the Holy Spirit: The communion of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, etc. These faith statements are assumed to be an outflow of the spirit's activity. Not so in this Flemish Lutheran Creed. The opening statement about "faith in the Link, Invigorator" ends with a period. A new succession of faith statements is opened up after that, each introduced by "**And**": "**And** (we express our faith) in the congregation... **And** we express our faith in the gathering of saints and sinners... **And** in the pardon that knows no limits..." There is less cohesiveness about these statements. Do they belong together? Are they just added on? Are they separate "articles of faith?"

Overall, this creed represents an individual creative effort that does not pay much attention to the theological tradition of the creeds. It also doesn't blend traditional and contemporary language in appealing ways. It lacks form and discipline in its literary expressions.

Notes:

- ¹ Lisa Frenz, Creed Number 7 on her website, "Lisa's Liturgies," at <https://sites.google.com/site/lisasliturgies/home>, accessed June 13, 2016.
- ² John Morris, <http://www.contemporarycreed.org.uk/>, accessed August 19.
- ³ Morris, *Contemporary Creed*, p. 20.
- ⁴ Morris, *Contemporary Creed*, p. 27.
- ⁵ *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, p. 38.
- ⁶ Website...
- ⁷ Gail Ullrich in an email from August 17, 2016.
- ⁸ *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, p. 11–12.
- ⁹ Barbara Brown-Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 9.
- ¹⁰ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing*, p. 135–136.
- ¹¹ <http://eirene-theou.blogspot.com/2009/09/modern-creed.html>, accessed May 4, 2016.
- ¹² <http://en.allexperts.com/q/Methodists-957/2009/6/Modern-Affirmation.htm>, accessed on Sept. 2, 2016.
- ¹³ <http://m.the-flemish-lutheran.webnode.com/news/an-expression-of-faith>, accessed June 17, 2016.

VI. Seasonal Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

Introduction:

Serving a church that adheres to the liturgical tradition, I wondered whether the Apostle's Creed could be adapted to the different liturgical seasons. The seasons of the church year have various theological foci, which are highlighted in the creeds of this chapter. Using those creeds during the intended liturgical seasons could strengthen people's awareness of the communal spiritual theme.

I started this practice a couple of years ago with a Christmas Creed that I found online. I like it for its storytelling and for turning the Christmas story into a series of personal creedal statements, encouraging the worshipping community to "own" it. I have used it for Christmas Eve services with families and children. This discovery inspired me to think more deeply about creeds in seasonal terms.

Soon after that, I wrote the creed of Epiphany with light as the lead symbol and borrowed language from the first chapter of John's gospel. A few years later I added the Humble Creed for the season of Lent. Jesus' suffering and humility during his passion were the inspiring elements. As a Lutheran, I have always had questions about the triumphant tone of our belief in the church. Luther's statement that we are all sinners and saints applies to the church on earth as much as it applies to any individual human being. In the third article of this Humble Creed I attempt to give credence to both the universal mystical reality of the church and its sinful manifestations on earth. I think it is important to observe times when we tone down our ecclesiology and acknowledge the church's humble reality.

I also wrote an Easter Creed. This creed uses images from the Easter stories, organizing them into Easter Morning, Easter Day and Easter Evening, a pseudo-Trinitarian structure. The Easter creed revolves around the theme of hope arising from the resurrection narratives. It takes an existential approach, applying the Easter experience to the lives of those who profess this creed.

The creed, God the Provider, was inspired by Thanksgiving and may be particularly useful in worship themes relating to Thanksgiving.

In all these creeds, certain aspects of classical Christian theology are missing, while one specific aspect is expressed more intensely. It's best to look at these creeds as a spotlight shining on one major aspect of our faith, which leaves other aspects in the twilight,

without denying or wanting to neglect them. These creeds are truly meant to be used as seasonal creeds.

1. A Christmas Creed

Introduction:

I found this creed a few years ago on the following website: www.prayer-and-prayers.info. Unfortunately, no individual author is listed. The site says: "All Pictures and details of the Prayer and Prayers website are provided for informational and educational purposes only and are subject to all U.S. copyright laws and remain property of their respective owners." (Updated March, 2015)

I believe in Jesus Christ and in the beauty of the gospel begun in Bethlehem.

I believe in the one whose spirit glorified a little town and whose spirit still brings music to persons all over the world.

I believe in the one for whom the crowded inn could find no room, but who transformed the place by his very presence.

I believe in the one who the rulers of the earth ignored and the proud could never understand; whose life was among common people, whose welcome came from persons with hungry hearts.

I believe in the one whose cradle was a mother's arms, who looked at persons and made them see what God's love saw in them, who by love brought sinners back to purity, and lifted human weakness up to meet the strength of God.

I confess my ever-lasting need of God: The need of forgiveness for my selfishness and greed, the need of new life for empty souls, the need of love for hearts grown cold.

I believe in God who gives us the best of himself.

I believe in Jesus, the Son of God, born in Bethlehem this night, for me and for the world.

Amen.

2. Creed of Epiphany

*I believe in God, the creator of the universe,
who spoke, "Let there be light!" and there was light,
setting in motion all of creation and blessing it to this day.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ,
The light that shines in the darkness;
The darkness cannot overcome it.
He embodied humanity in the image of God,
And suffered for the greater good.
He atoned for our sins
And died on the cross for us,
God's saving grace!*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The guiding light of God in our world.
Through his spirit, God conquers
The darkness of human sin,
Helps people grow and
Become the people they are meant to be.
I believe in the power of transformation,
Here in this world and in the world to come.
Amen.*

3. A Humble Creed (For the season of Lent)

*I believe in God, the creator of heaven and earth,
Who gave man and woman free will
And entrusted this precious world to us.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord,
Who was born in a manger by Mary,
A woman of humble beginnings.*

*Refusing to seek power,
And turning away the sword,
He died for us, the Lamb of God.
He descended into the darkest of all places,
But rose again on the third day,
Bringing life and hope to all.*

*I believe in Christ's humble spirit
Conceiving the holy, apostolic and universal church,
which is among us and beyond us, before us and after us.
I believe in a church comprised of sinners and saints,
imperfect and in need of grace,
yet blessed—the body of Christ.
I believe in the forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.*

4. Easter Creed

*I believe in the God of Easter morning
Who awakes us from our darkest dreams
And leads us into the light of a new day,
Who meets our pessimism
With stunning hope
Of angelic proclamation.*

*I believe in the God of Easter Day
Who beats us to the obstacles in our lives
And empties the dark tomb for us;
Who appears in surprising ways
When we least expect it;
Walking with us
On our detours.*

I believe in the God of Easter evening

*Who breaks into our closets and prisons,
Bringing peace and crushing our fear.
I believe in the risen Lord who meets us
with wounds on his hands and feet;
Who grants us his spirit,
Sending us out
To bring Shalom to the world.
Amen.*

5. God the Provider

For times of Thanksgiving and stewardship themes

*We believe in the God who provides for our every need,
Who has an answer to our deepest questions,
And a purpose for us in life.
Today we praise God the provider.*

*We believe in Jesus Christ, our holy brother,
Who stands by our side when light turns into darkness,
Who suffers our pain and turns it into a blessing.
For the presence of Christ in our lives,
We praise God the provider.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the breath of life,
Who inspires us when our spirits are dried up,
Who creates something new when old structures crumble.
For the spirit of hope and renewal,
We praise God the provider.
Amen.*

VII. Off the Beaten Path: Non-doctrinal Creeds with Introduction and Commentary

Introduction:

The creeds in this section are off the beaten path. They do not follow the Trinitarian structure of the early Christian creeds. The Iona creed was conceived in a spirit of Christian community activism. The Fresh Expression creed for 20s and 30s fits into a new, highly experimental type of Christian community. The Biblical Creed is an attempt to describe Judeo-Christian beliefs with a walk through the major narratives of the Bible, honoring each narrative for its powerful message.

1. Iona Creed

For background information about the Iona Community, see Chapter V, page 38/39.

*We believe that God is present
in the darkness before dawn;
in the waiting and uncertainty
where fear and courage join hands,
conflict and caring link arms,
and the sun rises over barbed wire.*

*We believe in a with-us God
who sits down in our midst
to share our humanity.*

*We affirm a faith
that takes us beyond a safe place:
into action, into vulnerability
and onto the streets.*

*We commit ourselves to work for change
and put ourselves on the line;
to bear responsibility, take risks,
live powerfully
and face humiliation;
to stand with those on the edge;
to choose life and be used by the Spirit
for God's new community of hope.*

Amen

Analysis and Critique:

From the start, it's obvious that this creed is to be spoken by the members and believers of a specific community or movement. The first plural employed here is not a universal Christian "we." This creed was conceived under a specific set of circumstances and conditions.

The starting point is somewhat unusual—God's presence "in the darkness before dawn." While one might initially think of Genesis 1 and the darkness that gave way to the creation of light, it quickly becomes clear that what's evoked here is human suffering. This creed doesn't begin somewhere in the dark night before creation but in the existential despair of a community on the edge. Even in the dawning of the day, the community doesn't know whether light will have the upper hand or whether darkness might win after all. It is at its core an existentialist creed. It begins and ends with the human subject.

The creed is written for a place "where fear and courage join hands" (at the same time a description of and an appeal to the community), "where conflict and caring link hands" (another appeal) and where "the sun rises over barbed wire" and nobody knows whether the barbed wire will ever vanish. It helps to remember when and where the Iona Community started: just before the start of World War II (1938), in an economical Depression, among working class people in Glasgow—in the context of poverty and blight. One might also remember the religious and cultural clashes in nearby Northern Ireland after World War II and the very real sight of barbed wire in that conflict. More than most others, this creed is contextual.

In that situation, creation theology is forgotten; instead, an immanent Christology moves into the center. It is a Christology that declines to speak about salvation through cross and resurrection. Instead, it solely emphasizes the compassion of Christ Immanuel (God with us), the suffering servant who shares our burdens and is part of an endangered community. No easy guarantees are given about salvation, no superficial hope is intoned, no metaphysical or mythic language is employed to transcend the faith beyond the here and now. It remains an existentialist, anthropocentric creed. God exists in the compassion of Christ our brother, but it always feels as if this Christ could end up on the cross without ever being resurrected.

The whole text has an activist ring to it. The community is called to get involved in the struggle, to engage in actions of hope and peaceful resistance, to become Christ's hands and feet in society. It is understood that this type of engagement entails risks for the individual and the community: "We affirm a faith that takes us beyond a safe place: into

action, into vulnerability and onto the streets." It is a certain version of Christian discipleship this creed is asking for.

As if this wasn't clear enough language, the final paragraph more than summarizes the required commitment to its members. It is a powerful and poignant sending appeal. One is reminded of the Suffering Servant poems in the book of the prophet Isaiah (Is 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9). Jesus' call to his disciples to abandon their possessions, follow him and pick up his cross, while not mentioned anywhere, also comes to mind. The language is activist and includes appeals like "work for change," "put ourselves on the line," "face humiliation," "stand with those on the edge," etc. These notions converge in the vision of a community of hope, which those who speak this creed plead their allegiance to.

And so, it appears that this is a sectarian, activist creed. Lacking in theological breadth, it purposefully aims at one goal: to energize a base toward working for justice and engaging in compassionate acts for and with the poor and marginalized. It is an admirable, powerful creed, which can be very effective in certain contexts, but should not be adapted into just any worship. Instead of adopting this creed, I suggest Christians everywhere are invited to ponder what in fact our commitment to Christ's teachings looks like. Anyone who reads, for instance, the gospel of Luke with its harsh criticism of apathy in the face of poverty and human suffering cannot easily dismiss this creed.

2. Fresh Expressions, Creed for Those in Their 20s and 30s

Introduction:

The following Creed comes from the UK-based website Fresh Expressions.¹ The movement, which grew out of joint mission efforts of the Church of England and the Methodist Church, purposefully looks beyond established church traditions and seeks to encourage worship communities for people outside the traditional church norms. Here is how Fresh Expressions describes itself:

Fresh Expressions seeks to transform communities and individuals through championing, resourcing and multiplying new ways of being church. We work with Christians from a broad range of denominations and traditions and the movement has resulted in thousands of new congregations being formed alongside more traditional churches.

A fresh expression of church is described as:

a new gathering or network that engages mainly with people who have never been to church. There is no single model, but the emphasis is on starting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something that works elsewhere. Over 3,000 of these new forms of church now exist in almost every denomination and tradition in the UK.

Fresh expressions of church:

- serve those outside church;
- listen to people and enter their context;
- make discipleship a priority: journeying with people to Jesus;
- form church.

Creed for 20s and 30s (Café Style)

God waits.

We believe in God

Three in one

Father Son Spirit

Paradox

Mystery

Elemental

We believe in a God of Justice

Compassion

Mercy

Hope

And first

A God of Love

Love personified

Incarnated

We believe in God

The Mother of Creation

*God the father of humanity
God the lover of us all*

*We believe we are called
To activity out of passivity and apathy
By the Son of God
Through his actions
Calling down through history
Borne on the wings of the Spirit*

*We believe we are called
To community with each other
Through Christ the thread
Weaving us all together*

*We believe that God
Has no favourites
Pulls no punches
Leaves no stone unturned*

*We believe that life is hard
We believe that life is beautiful
And so
We believe
So does God*

Analysis and Critique:

It is always dangerous to associate a text with a certain age group; likely, the allure will grow old with the people who identify with it. This creed is radically different from anything that church tradition has produced. The language is different. The structure is different. The audience is different. The setting is different. This creed is also described as "café style." Not surprisingly, it won over no admirers among the mostly elderly people

in the church focus groups. They were simply lost in this barrage of words and associations, aphorism seemingly coming out of nowhere.

The wonderful thing about the Fresh Expressions experiment is that it reaches out to people in different niches of society, forming new language that may work for a certain context at a certain time, but does not seek to be normative. While we appreciate this approach for what it is, this analysis and critique will measure it against the church tradition and mine it for its potentially enduring qualities.

I find the opening phrase fascinating: "God waits." Sure, for most people, including myself, this phrase is a little bit annoying. Isn't that what we do least well in our traditional, liturgical worship services: waiting, pausing, letting silence take hold? The message "God waits," tells us that, before we put our faith into words, before the divine presence dawns in our consciousness, God has already been there, waiting for us. And for anyone who is skeptical and doubtful about the spiritual or the religious, God simply waits.

The entire text is presented without punctuation, which sends a signal from the start: this is not a finished product and not meant to be one. The opening paragraph introducing God as Father, Son, Spirit adopts traditional terminology and follows it up with three further qualifications: paradox, mystery, elemental. This sets the tone by giving a mysterious air to the creed. The message is: we can't capture God. We can't assume that God is a "person," or that God fits into any other human category, despite the use of the Father-Son metaphor.

The next paragraph introduces God as a God of justice and again follows it up with three qualifications: compassion, mercy, hope. Interestingly, these attributes do not necessarily describe God. They are not adjectives but nouns—values in and of themselves; somehow they appear in God's neighborhood. This elevation of abstract values to creedal status is a phenomenon of the modern age. As a humanistic society, we believe in values, such as compassion, mercy, hope. God is to be found near those values. Is God also the source of them and does it even matter? The creed does not take a position.

The third paragraph is likely an exposition on the final phrase of the second paragraph: "A God of love." "Love personified, incarnated" hints at Jesus without ever mentioning his name or telling his story. That's at least how traditional Christians might read it—they equate "love personified, incarnated" with Jesus. A non-traditional, spiritually undefined population, however, will take this expression as a general value to believe in: wherever love is found, personified, embodied, somehow, this God of love is present, Jesus or not. There is a certain detachment from the traditional Christian narrative involved here. God

as Mother of Creation and God as Father of humanity, God as lover of us all embraces all that is. The absence of Jesus is striking.

The Son of God appears in the next paragraph by virtue of his prophetic role. He is calling the community out of apathy into some undefined activity. Yet, what are the actions of the Son of God that this paragraph is referring to? Presumably it's referring to all of Jesus' acts, or whichever acts one is most drawn to. It could be his call for justice, his compassion for the poor, his teachings about the kingdom of God, his healing acts...Because the tone of the entire creed is decidedly vague, this is left to one's imagination. In my opinion, that's both good and bad. It is good in the sense that it gives the spirit freedom to call people to different actions in accordance with their individual gifts and the needs of a certain context or time-period. It's bad, because people might read all sorts of activist actions into being "Christian," when these actions may not at all reflect Christ's teachings.

I like the metaphor in the following paragraph, referring to Christ as the thread that weaves the community together. In a patchwork community of people who come from different backgrounds and bring a wide range of religious/spiritual beliefs, this metaphor works. The community is not a sculpture carefully carved out by hundreds of years of tradition, but more like a quilt consisting of various images bound together by Christ. It is important to note that in this metaphor Christ is not part of the image but the thread that binds the different images together. Christ is serving the community. To what extent Christ is shaping the community remains to be seen.

The second-to-last paragraph provides a refreshing contrast to the earlier mystical terminology. Here, God is suddenly up-close, incarnate, communal. He is the good guy next door that "has no favourites and pulls no punches." He is like an ideal local politician, leaving "no stone unturned" for the people he represents and fights for. Of course, this degree of anthropomorphism has many analogies in the Bible and is a decent representation of God's immanence translated into more current colloquialisms. I also wonder whether an element of anti-clericalism is at play here in a sort of Neo-Protestant way. This could be the rejection of a God who chooses Jews or Christians over others, instead giving everybody a level playing field.

Finally, the last paragraph conveys wisdom about life itself. The juxtaposition of life's nature as "hard" and "beautiful" will resonate with most people. Believing does not deny life's demand for hard work; it also doesn't deny its beautiful and more pleasurable moments, but embraces them. Movements within the Christian religion have, at various times, veered toward spiritual escapism or denial of (sinful) pleasure. Neither can be

considered orthodox Christian teaching, but they have always lured Christians away from the center.

The conclusion of this creed is both interesting and controversial. It avoids stating that "we believe... in God." Believing has become its own thing. What this community believes in is described in the many paragraphs of the creed, but is ultimately left open. There is no "God lid" that neatly packs it all together and closes the deal; rather, God exists side by side with the people in this community, believing with them; or, conceivably, sometimes against them. It is not clear. But clarity is not something this creed strives for.

3. A Biblical Creed

Introduction:

I wrote this creed several years ago, inspired by the richness of biblical storytelling. In our traditional Christian creeds, we mostly neglect the Hebrew scriptures in favor of the Christian gospel, putting the story of Christ front and center. While this approach is undeniably appropriate for the Christian faith, I was trying to pull together and celebrate the larger biblical narratives. They are painted with a broad stroke and in chronological order.

This creed is best appreciated by people who have basic biblical knowledge, because the creed only hints at the narratives evoked here. Those who have listened to these stories can go so much deeper with it. I have always been drawn to the spiritual implications of the great biblical narratives. The origins of Israel's faith in the experience of the patriarchs speaks about God's journeying with us. God leading Abraham to a new beginning in a place that is yet unknown to him; God pursuing Jacob and making him the father of Israel despite all his flaws... This will speak to many contemporary people. The implication is that God doesn't judge you and will eventually give a purpose and destination to your life's journey. I believe that's a powerful message for all the (urban) nomads among us.

The Exodus narrative spoke powerfully to the African American community in our country and continues to resonate with oppressed people everywhere on earth. The Exodus journey through the wilderness has become a powerful spiritual metaphor. It indicates that in our inner lives we often need to go through extended dry spells and doubts before we get to a place of stability and promise.

The prophetic tradition speaks so consistently about God's love of justice and so unflinchingly about the responsibility of the affluent. How can we not mention this at least every so often in a formal summation of our faith, in a creed?

In this specific creed, Jesus' divinity is not mentioned, nor are cross and resurrection. Christ appears as but one witness in a long line of prophetic leaders. Likewise, this creed stays away from any soteriological language. Therefore, it is fair to question whether it can be called a "Christian" creed. Although this creed was written primarily for Christians who have heard and appreciated the various biblical stories, it could be a nice fit for an interfaith service with Jews and perhaps even Muslims. That's because it is primarily intended to celebrate the biblical narratives without tailoring them to the dogmatic concerns of our religion.

*We believe in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,
Who journeys with us through life,
And leads us to new beginnings!*

*We believe in the God of Moses,
Who frees us from oppression and
Guides us through desert, wilderness and sin
To the Promised Land!*

*We believe in the God of the prophets,
Who asks for justice in our land,
And cares for the poor!*

*We believe in Jesus Christ,
who brought the Gospel to us,
who celebrated God's unconditional love
for everyone!*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit,
Who forms and molds us into God's image,
Who sends us out to serve God and people,
Who leads us to everlasting life!
Amen.*

4. A Creed of Faith, Hope and Love

Introduction:

I also wrote this creed a few years ago. I have never used it in a public worship service and would be very careful about doing so (without further explanation) in a traditional setting. This text might be a better fit in a casual, café-style Christian service. Its theology is submerged under powerful images. It is clearly inspired by 1 Corinthians 13:13. This creed shows many cross-connections between the trifacta faith, love, hope and central biblical images, such as the burning bush, as well as the death and resurrection of Christ. In the way in which it singles out love, faith and hope as articles of faith, it is decidedly modern and not meant to be taken seriously as a "Christian Creed." Rather, I want people to look at it as a playful exposition of what the trifacta of faith, hope and love can mean for our spiritual journeys as Christians. And I would like people to feel the power of these three magical words by recognizing their connection to God's revelations, as recorded in the Holy Scripture.

*I believe in the fire of love,
A passion for life and justice,
Melting hatred, prejudice and fear,
Cleansing and purifying,
Unselfish and Sacrificial,
A burning bush.*

*I believe in the power of faith,
Rooted in Christ's sacrifice,
A paradox that lives
On a cross,
Shrouded in mystery,
Yet clear as day.*

*I believe in the spirit of hope,
Alive in the face of our sorrows,
Defying humanity's flaws,
A hope that was born
In an empty tomb
But is not empty at all.*

Amen.

Notes:

¹'Fresh expressions of church' is a term coined by the Church of England report "[Mission-shaped Church](#)" and used in the Church of England and the Methodist Church for the last five years.

It is a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them; because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church. There is no single model to copy but a wide variety of approaches for a wide variety of contexts and constituencies. The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context rather than cloning something which works elsewhere.

Some fresh expressions are very different from church as we have been used to it in the UK – there is a surfer church on Polzeath beach, a youth congregation based in a skate park and a church for skiers. Others are more familiar but in unfamiliar settings – such as church in a café, pub, church or school. They can be found in rural areas as well as in towns and cities and have been planted to reach all age groups - pensioners as well as those focused on children or young families. There is no intention to divide people up. The surfer church does not have security guards to ban non-surfers at the door. But the aim is to plant church into the communities to which people actually belong. Then those churches can reach out to people who are different as well. Many churches are neighbourhood based, but fresh expressions of church are also planted into networks.

This is based on two important biblical principles, both found in 1 Corinthians. First they assume that when the gospel is preached in a new community, God grows a church, not just wins some individual Christians. Paul says that he planted the gospel seed, others watered it, but God gave the growth and what he grew was the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3.6-9). He also says that when the new believers were baptised, they were all baptised 'into one body' (1 Corinthians 12.13) The second principle is that, just as God's Son entered our world to win us, so Christian missionaries need to enter the cultures they are trying to reach (1 Corinthians 9.19-23), so that new believers only have to face the stumbling block of the cross (1 Corinthians 1.18-25) and not the stumbling block of church culture as well! They can then become agents for change within their culture rather than be drawn out of it into a church culture, which may be alien to them.

The Fresh Expressions initiative has been encouraging and resourcing these developments for the past ten years. It has coined a working definition of a fresh expression of church. It will not be the final word but it is good enough for now.

"A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

- *It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples.*
- *It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context."*

It is a long definition but it is worth unpacking carefully.

VIII. Focus Groups: Data and Conclusions

In May and June of 2016 I conducted six focus groups in various churches observing liturgical traditions in southeastern Pennsylvania. They included three Lutheran churches, an Episcopalian church, a United Church of Christ congregation and a United Methodist church. In a first step, I asked them questions about the Apostle's Creed, which are compiled and analyzed here. What makes these focus groups and "polls" unfinished business is the fact that the attendees of these adult education sessions consisted almost exclusively of older generations with few people under the age of 60. Therefore, this data most likely represents a more traditional view of Christian faith and theology. I would like to conduct another survey, targeting younger audiences. Here are the results and some of my conclusions.

1. The Apostle's Creed

I asked people nine questions. The multiple-choice questions are tallied up. Regarding the open-ended questions, I try to capture answering patterns.

Question 1: How often is the Apostle's Creed used in worship?

Weekly or almost weekly: 42
Occasionally: 12
Hardly ever: 1
Total number of responses: 55

Question 2: How important is this Creed to your personal faith?

Very important in its entirety: 34
Parts of it are important to me: 15
It's not all that important to me: 6
Total number of responses: 55

Question 3: Do you know the Apostle's Creed by heart?

I could recite it without help at any time: 22
I remember it with the help of a worshipping community: 29
I usually read the text: 4
Total number of responses: 55

Question 4: What aspect of the Creed is sacred to you? (Multiple responses allowed)

The fact that it goes back to very early Christian times: 25

The fact that it is an Ecumenical Creed: 42

Its Trinitarian structure: 16

Total number of responses: 73

Question 5: Are there parts of the Apostle's Creed that you have trouble professing or that frequently raise doubts in you?

No response (blank): 9

Response "No": 28

Specific comments: 19

Total number of responses: 56

Patterns of specific responses:

Conception/Virgin Birth (4)

"Descended into hell" — biblical basis? (3)

"Catholic" — "Christian" more accurate (3)

"Resurrection of the body" (2)

Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead (2)

Question 6: Are there parts of your personal faith which are not sufficiently or not at all expressed in the Apostle's Creed?

No response (blank): 14

Response "No": 18

Specific comments: 22

Patterns of specific comments:

- Doesn't talk about how to live our daily lives or act toward others (7)
(This was the only clear pattern, all other answers covered a multitude of issues without another clear pattern.)

Question 7: Given the choice between the three articles of the Creed (Father, Son, Spirit), which one is most important to you and your personal faith and why?

No response (blank): 7

They are equally important: 12

Father: 16 ; Son: 7 ; Spirit: 11

Specific comments: 29

Most common reasons why people chose Father:

Creator, foundational to everything we believe, source of all life, Maker of heaven and earth, etc.

Most common reasons why people chose Son:

Redeemer, relatable, specific to the Christian faith, explains God, died for us...

Most common reason why people chose Spirit:

Feeling, connectedness, connects Father and Son, guidance...

Question 8: Do you think the Apostle's Creed expresses adequately the faith of most Christians? Please explain why or why not.

No response (blank): 6

Yes: 23

Specific comments: 28

Patterns of specific comments:

The important tenets of the Christian faith are expressed (5)

It speaks to "ritual" Christians but not "book" Christians (3)

Not deep enough (4)

Not sure about other Christians (4)

Question 9: Do you think the Apostle's Creed could have any meaning to people outside of the Christian community?

No response (blank): 9

Yes, because: 26

No, because: 21

Patterns of comments:

- Yes, because it defines/explains our beliefs (10)
- No, because it has no relevance to non-Christians (12)

Conclusions:

Almost all participants in these focus groups were familiar with the Apostle's Creed. The responses show a consistently high satisfaction level with the importance of the creed and its effectiveness in summarizing the Christian faith. When people were asked specifically about possible doubts, the approval rate was still high (Question 5). Aspects of the creed which were doubtful to some respondents included the parts with mythical overtones: Virgin Birth, Descent into Hell, Judgment, etc. When asked about possible missing pieces regarding people's personal faith, a majority once again found nothing amiss (Question 6). Yet, a significant minority responded that the Apostle's Creed does not talk enough about Christian ethics or how people should lead their lives. When asked to choose a person of the Trinity as most important to one's faith, the Son received the least number of votes, somewhat surprisingly to me, since the second article is the longest in both the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds. People were split down the middle on the question whether the Apostle's Creed could be in any way relevant for non-Christians.

The responses were helpful in validating two of my hypotheses:

- I expected that the areas that could be explored more deeply in alternative creeds would be creation theology and Christian ethics. The responses seemed to validate that to some extent.
- I expected that people might have some problems with aspects of the creed mentioned under Question 5, but I probably expected an even stronger response regarding people's questions about Virgin Birth, Descent into Hell, etc.

2. Surveys about various alternative creeds

In addition to the surveys about the Apostle's Creed I also posed a set of questions about various alternative creeds and asked individuals to select two of the creeds I presented and send me responses, which I received back mostly by mail. It is much more complicated to summarize those results and I ultimately decided that the data is not strong enough to be useful. I will restrict myself to the first question here to give readers a flavor of the response.

Question 1: How would you describe your level of agreement with this Creed?

- I completely agree with it. I can profess this Creed.
- I mostly agree with it, but I have some questions about it.
- I have many questions about this Creed.

In trying to describe the approval level of each surveyed creed amongst the responders, I counted the first answer as 100% approval, the second as 75 % approval and the third as 25% approval.

A Short Christian Creed: 100% approval (3 responses)

Celtic Creed (Iona): 92 % approval (6 responses)

Affirmation of Faith (UMC): 90% approval (8 responses)

Modern Creed (Kurtz): 75 % approval (5 responses)

My Creed (John Morris): 62.5 % approval (4 responses)

Flemish Lutheran Creed: 60% approval (5 responses)

Biblical Creed: 50% approval (3 responses)

Fresh Expressions Creed: 37.5% approval (8 responses)

IX. Potential Contributions of Alternative Creeds to the Cultural/Theological Questions of Our Time

I set out to explore the benefits of using alternative creeds in liturgical worship.

“Liturgical worship” is worship that follows the traditional ordo that goes back to the early church; it honors and observes the feasts and seasons of the liturgical year, from the First Sunday of Advent to Christ the King Sunday in late November. The creed is an integral part of this traditional form of worship and is usually recited by the entire congregation. The structure of liturgical worship is pretty much set, and it is what most worshippers in this setting expect.

So, what can alternative creeds contribute to a form of worship that draws its identity from adherence to tradition and the predictability of its order? Why change things in a setting that doesn’t exactly value or encourage change?

I tried to explain in the introduction my belief that liturgy, in order to speak to as many people as possible, needs to breathe and allow current language to be included in the worship experience. In liturgical worship, which is more regimented than most other forms of worship, this can be done in various ways. Every pastor may decide where he or she will include contextual elements in the liturgy. The sermon is the obvious place where tradition and contemporary life are engaged in conversation. The prayers of intercession are often used to bring local issues and the needs and yearnings of a community to the forefront of people’s spiritual consciousness – and into the presence of God. A Call to Worship or the Order of Confession may also be articulated in ways that engage contemporary themes.

Every pastor will also decide which parts should be left the way they have always been said and done. This should not be viewed as a matter of inflexibility or conservatism on their part. There are often good reasons to keep things the same. Many people draw comfort from certain parts of the liturgy that remain the same and can be recited by heart, even more so in a world that constantly changes and rushes us. In my own practice, for instance, I purposefully never update the language of the Lord’s Prayer. I value the fact that people can close their eyes, zone into the presence of God and recite this prayer, including all its outdated Anglican-Victorian expressions, without having to pay attention to something written on paper.

Should the creed always remain the same? Good arguments can be made in favor of keeping the creeds the same and sticking to the most common traditional ones: The Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds. They are ecumenical creeds, articulating orthodox Christian positions that the early church fathers labored over. They bind together large parts of the Christian world in one faith. They are time-honored and solid; the central Christian Trinitarian dogma is carefully woven into them. Luke Timothy Johnson’s argument about adhering to a unified Christian faith narrative that is countercultural to our culture’s

individualistic tendencies also holds weight. And even some emerging church models have rediscovered the value of the ancient creeds.

Still, I think there are equally important arguments to be made for alternative creeds, not with the goal to replace, but to complement the traditional ones. The arguments have been articulated in this study, such as: 1) preventing worship automatism; 2) highlighting central aspects of our faith which are not addressed in the traditional creeds; 3) using more inclusive language; 4) being more contextual; 5) embracing new language for the articulation of our faith; 6) reaching different audiences.

Common weaknesses of alternative creeds are: a lack of theological thoroughness, the tendency to sacrifice theology for the sake of creativity, as well as questionable form and aesthetic. In this study, I provide my own insights into the strengths and weaknesses of each creed presented. I would strongly caution against attempting to find a “perfect” creed which covers the entire height and depth of our faith, preferably in a three-paragraph, worship-friendly document. Even the traditional creeds don’t meet that objective, as thorough as they are. Respective creeds will give better expression to certain parts of our faith tradition while neglecting or under-presenting others. That’s why I would not use the same alternative creeds all the time but use them intentionally, preferably in harmony with a church season or worship theme. I would also advocate for the frequent use of traditional creeds in liturgical worship, lest they become forgotten or marginalized.

The most important benefits of using carefully chosen alternative creeds in our liturgical worship settings are to articulate central Christian beliefs in more inclusive, thoughtful and thought-provoking ways, to address aspects of the Christian faith that are under-presented in the traditional creeds (such as Jesus’ teachings and ethics) and the opportunity to re-phrase mythical language in terminology that’s less prone to literalism and misunderstanding.

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