



Invigorating Our Confessions of Faith (Creeds) with the Assistance of Romans

JUSTIN J. LIND-AYRES

DUSTING OFF THE CHURCH'S TREASURES

Recently I was worshiping with area pastors and deacons at a conference event. The host church had in its pew-rack hymnals that were over forty years old. Yet, they were still being employed by the congregation in its weekly worship. Despite the publication of newer denominational hymnals over the span of four decades, this congregation continued its allegiance to the “green book” with its tattered edges and fraying spine. My hunch is it has as much to do with the congregation’s frugality as it does to its faithfulness to the liturgical practices codified in the 1970s.

When the time came in our conference worship to sing a hymn, we were instructed to turn to the hymnals in our pews. Before I could grab the book in front of me, my dear friend and pastor colleague reached for it. With a smirk on her face, she delicately opened its pages, took a slight intake of breath, and pretended to blow the dust out from the pages of the hymnal. I’m not sure if it was the

Almost from the beginning, Christians have publicly and corporately confessed their faith in common statements, the most universally accepted being the three ecumenical creeds. But perhaps new contexts in our contemporary world call for the addition of new statements of faith alongside the classic ones.

morning light playing tricks on my eyes or my own imagination sparked by her joke, but I thought I saw a cloud of dust waft up from that green book. Whatever the case, I giggled my way through the first stanza of that hymn.

In truth, every time we gather in worship around Scripture, we dust off the centuries of its usage to allow God's word to speak anew in our gathering. As Jesus proclaimed in Matthew's Gospel, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52). The public reading of Scripture and proclamation thereof lend to the scribal work described by Jesus. Faithful preaching (teaching) is biblical—our bringing out the ancient canonical witness to God's grace so that it may incarnate among God's beloved again. Dust can give way to new life, biblically speaking.

Liturgically speaking, however, old hymnals and their orders of worship may need updating, supplementing, or replacing to make room for diverse forms of Christian worship, global voices, contextual relevancy, and expansive or inclusive language. The tension between holding the traditional expressions of a particular worshiping context alongside emerging contemporary practices is felt among many faith communities in the North American context. Metaphorically blowing the dust out of our hymnals is one way to reexamine liturgical practices with an eye toward contextual relevancy. This is a healthy practice for any congregation faithfully wrestling with this tension. With that said, the dustiest part of the liturgy for me these days is the corporate recitation of one of the three ecumenical creeds: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creed.

The tension between holding the traditional expressions of a particular worshiping context alongside emerging contemporary practices is felt among many faith communities in the North American context.

A short time ago I attended the funeral liturgy for a friend's father at a nearby Lutheran church. Since creeds were at the forefront of my mind, I took note of the Apostles' Creed presence in the funeral worship. Following the sermon and congregational hymn of the day, the assembly was invited to rise and confess together the Apostles' Creed. I stole a moment, looked around the sanctuary, and noted that many people were close-mouthed. While some attendees read the creed in unison, others opted to remain silent. I wondered if this theological statement, with its early iterations attributed to the fourth century, had any relevance in the grieving hearts of those believers and nonbelievers alike some 1,700 years later.¹ Does this dusty theological confessional statement still speak to God's people today?

¹ The general consensus among scholars concludes that the Apostles' Creed was not, in fact, written by the early apostles named in Scripture. Rather, "The title 'Apostles' Creed,' or *symbolum apostolorum*, which first occurs in a letter sent by the synod of Milan (390) to Pope Siricius and probably drafted by St. Ambrose." J. N. D.

As a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), my ordination rite included this question: “Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these [Apostles’, Nicene, Athanasian] creeds and [Lutheran] confessions?”² I responded, “I will, and I ask God to help me.” With this pledge, I have joined thousands of church leaders in the task of holding the ecumenical creeds in high regard and utilizing them in the faith-life of the church. This means that creedal statements, and in particular the Apostles’ Creed (the shortest of the three), are a mainstay in worship services in my ecumenical circles as church leaders seek to honor this or a similar promise to lift up the creeds for the edification of the community. Hence, the presence of the creeds in the liturgy of many mainline Protestant and Catholic worship services, including funerals.

Herein lies the tension for me: how do I live into this vow to honor the creeds in my ministry while recognizing that the creeds can feel anachronistic and irrelevant, if not altogether dusty, to modern churchgoers? Do the creeds still have a place in the worshiping life of the body of Christ? Indeed, I have heard the question many times throughout my ministry: “Why do we continue to say the Apostles’ Creed in our weekly worship?” It is a fair question, as liturgical scholars Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop wrote,

The creeds were originally teaching documents, at home in baptismal catechesis, learned by heart by baptismal candidates and then used in the celebration of baptism itself, not in the regular Sunday liturgy.³

The integration of creedal statements in worship was not their original intent; nevertheless, this is the current liturgical practice as leaders called and commissioned by the church seek to uphold the promise to keep the ecumenical creeds relevant in our teaching and preaching.

At first glance, the choice for leaders appears to be either/or. *Either* we continue as is, reciting the creeds in the liturgy despite their dusty feel for some (myself included), *or* we heed Brugh and Lathrop’s advice and shelve the creeds on Sunday morning opting to use them in our catechetical and education programs. I am more than hesitant to cast a vote. So, I wonder if a third way would be more fruitful and, perhaps, ever more faithful? What if we took Jesus’s advice from Matthew 13 in our approach to the creeds? What might happen if we saw ourselves as scribes trained for the heavenly reign who, like the scribes of old, brought out of their treasure “what is new and what is old” in order to teach the faith of the past

Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds: Third Edition* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 1. The codification of the Apostles’ Creed happened over the span of a few centuries through ecumenical councils.

² Lutheran Church in America, *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 194. The full statement leading to the question above is as follows: “The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scripture. Will you therefore preach and teach?” Incidentally, this is the companion to the same “green book” I am referencing.

³ Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 165.

alive and at work among us now? Maybe the creeds are such treasures that sparkle when seen in new light?

What might happen if we saw ourselves as scribes trained for the heavenly reign who, like the scribes of old, brought out of their treasure “what is new and what is old” in order to teach the faith of the past alive and at work among us now? Maybe the creeds are such treasures that sparkle when seen in new light?

CONFESSING OUR FAITH TOGETHER

The apostle Paul wrote in Rom 10:9, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Paul’s statement has been the benchmark of the confessing church of Jesus Christ. As such, confession itself is at the heart of the Christian faith. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann said in no uncertain terms, “The public confession of Jesus Christ is the divine definition of this faith.”⁴ Belief and confession in Jesus are matters of salvation, and witnessing to Jesus is a public, corporate endeavor. If one’s salvation was at stake, it is no wonder that creedal statements were written to insure proper confession!

But, the backdrop for the solidification of formal congruous statements of belief is really multiformity of thought. To this point, Moltmann said: “Christ has also from the very beginning been confessed with constantly new words, images and gestures.”⁵ Faith is dynamic, and a formulaic declaration of faith may at times be at odds with this dynamism. Not only that, the biblical account of Jesus is not singular, even though Paul’s statement in Romans 10 may appear simple enough. Truth be told, there is no one witness to the Jesus in Scripture. In fact, historian William Placher asserted, “Christians who are nervous about diversity of belief should probably not read the New Testament carefully.”⁶ Again, a tension arises for believers: state a clear, concise faith in Jesus amid the diverse and dynamic biblical and theological descriptions of the life and witness of Jesus.

In his substantive work *Credo*, Jaroslav Pelikan offered several working definitions of “creeds” and “confessions” among Protestants and Catholics. Among those definitions, he wrote:

Historically considered, creeds are convenient summaries arising out of definite religious situations, designed to meet urgent contemporary

⁴ Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, “The Confession of Jesus Christ: A Biblical Theological Consideration,” in *An Ecumenical Confession of Faith*, ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (New York: Seabury, 1979), 13.

⁵ Küng and Moltmann, “Confession of Jesus Christ,” 13.

⁶ William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 33.

needs, and serving as tests of orthodoxy. . . . In confession, the Christian community gives its expression to God's saving action and fellowship with Christ.⁷

As Pelikan notes, the creeds were situational, addressing theological concerns of a particular time to stave off heresy while creating a commitment to orthodoxy. Two major theological aims of the Apostles' Creed, for example, were to name the Trinitarian nature of God and claim the dual nature of Jesus as both human and divine. The ecumenical creeds are historical, doctrinal statements that anchor the church in the past and elucidate the theological concerns of a time and place in the early church. These statements may still embolden a community's expression and confession to God's saving action; yet, today's context may call for new expressions, interpretations, and statements of faith that take seriously the history between the formulations of the ecumenical creeds until now. That is, we may benefit by taking out the old treasures (the ecumenical creeds) and placing them alongside the new ones (contemporary statements of faith).

The ecumenical creeds are historical, doctrinal statements that anchor the church in the past and elucidate the theological concerns of a time and place in the early church. These statements may still embolden a community's expression and confession to God's saving action; yet, today's context may call for new expressions, interpretations, and statements of faith.

Though many in mainline Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes routinely use the ecumenical creeds in their worship, some have been experimenting with newer forms for years. These newer forms are not meant to replace the historical creeds many of us vowed to teach and preach. Rather, they serve as alternative voices to contextualize faith, expose Christians to the other confessional voices of faith from around the globe, and ultimately (hopefully) enable communities to hear afresh the ecumenical creeds all too often spoken by rote or with reserve.

Among the statements of faith I have heard in various congregational settings in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, these are noteworthy: the Affirmation of Faith from *A New Zealand Prayer Book*,⁸ *The Masai Creed* of East Africa,⁹ and

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 4.

⁸ "The Affirmation of Faith," in *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (United Kingdom: W. Collins, 1989), 481. This affirmation can also be viewed here: <http://anglicanprayerbook.nz/476e.html>.

⁹ The Masai Creed is attributed, in part, to the work of Vincent J. Donovan, a Catholic priest and misologist who served in Tanzania in the 1960s and 1970s. Working with and among the Masai people, Father Donovan shared this statement of faith created in this context to articulate an East African Christianity in his work, *Christianity Rediscovered* (New York: Orbis, 1978). This statement can be viewed here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masai_Creed.

various affirmations of faith from the Iona Community in Scotland.¹⁰ All of these statements of belief rise out of a community seeking to confess the triune God of the Christian faith within a unique context. For the sake of brevity, I will highlight just one aspect of these creed-like statements.

The Masai Creed, described by Pelikan, was prepared in the 1960s by the Holy Ghost Fathers in East Africa as a movement toward a particular African Christianity.¹¹ The statement of faith “demonstrates its indigenization in African ethnic tradition when it describes Jesus Christ as having been ‘always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love.’”¹² This language, along with phrasing about “hyenas” and “tribes” gives a distinct contextual feel that has the ability to teach congregations in the United States new ways of understanding the global Jesus.

In a similar way, the Affirmation of Faith from New Zealand and the Iona affirmations give glimpses of a more expansive church. The New Zealand affirmation was written for the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, and was thus bilingually written in English and Maori languages. The cosmic scope of the statement, likely influenced by this intercultural reality, can be heard as it declares, “You, O God, are infinitely generous, good beyond all measure.”¹³ In the same way, one of the many Iona community’s statements of faith centers the community’s identity in the reality of an expansive God, declaring that “God’s power topples tyrants, and brings down walls of separation; God’s love embodies the tenderness of a mother and father, encouraging and caring for each of us.”¹⁴

The Masai Creed and the affirmations of faith from New Zealand and Iona communities provide new voices to buoy the ancient ones. I would argue that the beginning of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed—“We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church”—is a much richer statement when placed along these and other statements of faith from around the world. The universality of faith and commonwealth we share as the body of Christ is more evident when faith is articulated from one context to another.

Understandably, some communities of faith and their leaders may be nervous to supplement or replace the traditional ecumenical creeds with newer and likely less-vetted theological statements of belief in worship. Perhaps a place to begin is the Bible or, more specifically, the book of Romans. After all, as liturgical scholars Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop recalled, the creeds were never intended to be used in weekly worship, and “biblical language, not doctrinal and

¹⁰ There are several statements of faith in *The Iona Abbey Worship Book* (Glasgow, UK: Wild Goose, 2017).

¹¹ Pelikan, *Credo*, 328.

¹² Pelikan, *Credo*, 328.

¹³ *New Zealand Prayer Book*, 481. This is the opening statement of the second paragraph or article of this statement of faith.

¹⁴ *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, 95.

creedal language, ought to be the basis of our liturgy.”¹⁵ What if in an attempt to dust-off and refresh the recitation of creeds, the church turned to Paul’s letter to the Romans for a statement of faith? By bringing out Scripture—the oldest of the church’s treasures—and engaging it as a corporate confessional statement in public worship, maybe both our creeds and our Scripture will be heard and received in new ways.

What if in an attempt to dust-off and refresh the recitation of creeds, the church turned to Paul’s letter to the Romans for a statement of faith? By bringing out Scripture—the oldest of the church’s treasures—and engaging it as a corporate confessional statement in public worship, maybe both our creeds and our Scripture will be heard and received in new ways.

STATEMENT OF FAITH ACCORDING TO THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Why Romans? If the body of Christ gathers to worship and engages any book of the Bible to use as a confession of faith, why choose the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Romans? The oft-quoted line from church historian Sydney Ahlstrom’s is one answer: “Christian theology is a series of footnotes to St. Paul.”¹⁶ In order to make a theological statement of faith in Jesus, one likely has to traverse the “breath-taking theological and spiritual vision” of Paul’s work in Romans.¹⁷ It is Martin Luther’s words that are perhaps the most convincing:

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also . . . we can never read it or ponder over it too much for the more we deal with it, the more precious and the better it tastes.¹⁸

What better way to inculcate the people of God with the “precious taste” of Romans than putting these words on their lips in worship!

The import of Romans in the faith and witness in Christianity cannot be understated as evidenced by Luther and Ahlstrom, among others. Using the

¹⁵ Brugh and Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*, 165.

¹⁶ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 23.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 395.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (1522, Revised 1546),” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 98.

biblical words and phrases from the apostle Paul as a creed-like statement in worship has the potential to help believers experience the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds in a new way. In fact, I truly believe that exposure to contextualized statements of faith from Christian communities around the world can enliven worshiping communities in their own confessional practices. But the Bible, especially the sacred words of the church's first theologian, is an excellent place to start this "dusting-off" exercise in the liturgy.

What follows is a succinct statement of faith solely utilizing Romans. Language has been slightly adapted to be more inclusive and expansive, but the theological emphases seeks to remain congruent with the ecumenical creeds: Trinitarian expression of God, the personhood/divinity of Jesus, the salvific work of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in God's church, and the promise of life everlasting. The Roman passages that comprise this confession were selected based on the thrust of Paul's overarching argument in Rom 1:16–17 that "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" in Christ Jesus. I also sought to highlight Scripture texts that are heard in the context of worship that will resonate with seasons of the church year. For instance, I draw on Romans 1, 3, 5, and 8, chapters given priority in both the Revised Common Lectionary (Year A, Season after Pentecost) and the Narrative Lectionary (Year 1, Easter Season). Also, Romans 6 is deeply embedded in funeral liturgies and thus heard frequently in the context of worship.

It is my hope this Romans statement of faith (or an adapted/abbreviated version) is tried in some congregational settings. It would make an excellent echo to a summer sermon series on Romans, to be sure. Finally, I hope this statement of faith relying on the apostle Paul may invigorate worshiping communities' engagement with the Apostles' Creed or any ecumenical creed or statement of faith.

Leader: What then are we to say? (6:1)

Assembly: We are not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. (1:16)

Since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. (1:20)

This power of God, which God promised beforehand through the prophets and in holy scriptures, is the gospel concerning the Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ, through whom we have received grace. (1:1–4)

For we confess that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; but now we are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (3:23–24)

For God proves God's love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (5:8)

And we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised by the glory of God, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Christ in Christ's crucifixion, we will certainly be united with Christ in Christ's resurrection. (6:4–5)

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (8:26), the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (8:16) And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (8:27)

For we are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus in the unity of Holy Spirit. (8:38–39)

Through this power of God, we appeal, one to another: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another, serve God. Let us rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, preserve in prayer, extend hospitality to strangers (12:9–13), and let us welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us (15:7), according to God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen! (16:27) ☩

JUSTIN J. LIND-AYRES works in campus ministry at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Augsburg University in Minneapolis. He is the author of Is That Poop on My Arm? Parenting While Christian (Fortress, 2018).