

## Creed as *Verbum Breviatum*

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#### Abstract:

This article is about what creed as such was taken to be in early Christianity. It was believed to be what Romans 9:28 terms as *verbum breviatum* [Dei]. As a summary of Scripture and Christian faith, it rested on the apostolic authority. Yet, in time, there came to be many different ‘summaries of Scripture’ and, consequently, a need for certain hermeneutical criteria became evident. Various problems which became apparent with the proliferation of different creeds contributed to the reasons why confessing creed(s) was later discontinued altogether in some churches. The aim of this article is to revive the early Christian perception of creeds and encourage the use of the universally accepted ancient creeds (i.e. the Apostles’ Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) in the worship services of those churches which for one or another reason no longer confess them.

#### Keywords:

Creed; credal statements; Scripture; early Christianity; non-credalism

### Introduction

No doubt, the perception of what a creed as such is taken to be has changed drastically over time. For various historical, theological, and ideological reasons (and at times, because of misunderstandings as well), not all contemporary Christian churches confess the most well-known ancient creeds (that is, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and/or the Apostles’ Creed). Instead, and if at all, some Christians use various statements of faith of their own making — be these creeds, denominational confessions, church covenants, or other documents determining the theological identity of various associations and organisations.

It is well known that, due to a contrary understanding of Scripture and tradition, Luther wanted his theology to be based on *sola*

*scriptura*.<sup>1</sup> However, not every reformer had the same understanding of what this *sola* exactly excluded. To use an (over)simplified distinction, there were more inclusive understandings of *sola scriptura* (e.g. magisterial reformers: creeds were ‘in’, (medieval) tradition/canon law were ‘out’<sup>2</sup>) and more exclusive understandings of *sola scriptura* (e.g. spiritualists and Collegiants: both creeds and (medieval) tradition/canon law were ‘out’<sup>3</sup>). Perhaps the emergence and development of anti-credal/anti-confessional attitudes had their own good reasons, but these concerned more what creed had become in the eyes of the perceivers, rather than what it was meant to be from the very beginning.

What arguably happened was that the in itself scriptural distinction between 1) the God-breathed Scripture and 2) human laws/traditions (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; Matt 15:9; Mark 7:8–9; Col 2:8) was eventually turned into a mutually exclusive dichotomy and applied to various Christian texts.<sup>4</sup> While the *Belgic Confession* (1561) stated, ‘We must not consider human writings [...] nor councils, decrees, and

<sup>1</sup> Anna Vind, ‘The Solas of the Reformation’, in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. by David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 267–71.

<sup>2</sup> Luther wrote, ‘I believe the words of the Apostles’ Creed to be the work of the Holy Ghost; the Holy Spirit alone could have enunciated things so grand, in terms so precise, so expressive, so powerful. No human creature could have done it, nor all the human creatures of ten thousand worlds. This creed, then, should be the constant object of our most serious attention. For myself, I cannot too highly admire or venerate it.’ (*Martin Luther: Tabletalk*, trans. by William Hazlitt (London: Fount, 1995), p. 138 (§264)) The Apostles’ Creed is accepted in Luther’s *Small Catechism* 2 and *Large Catechism* 2 (1529), the *Anglican Catechism* (1549/1662), and Caspar Olevianus, *Exp. symb. Ap.* (1576); the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the *Marburg Articles* 1 (1529), *Augsburg Confession* 1.1 (1530), and the *Professio fidei Tridentinae* 1 (1564); and all three creeds (the Athanasian Creed included) in *Smalcald Articles* 1.4 (1537), *Formula of Concord I* (Epitome).3, the *Ten Articles* 1.1 (1536), the *French Confession* 5 (1559/1571), and in an early Baptist confession with an untypical name *The Orthodox Creed* 38 (1678).

<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, Anabaptists were neither non- nor anti-credal (Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition*, Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies (Kitchener: Pandora, 2003)). Some of them either accepted the Apostles’ Creed (e.g. Balthasar Hübmaier, *A Christian Catechism* (1526) and Peter Riedemann, *Confession of Faith* (1543–1545)), or preferred their own confessions of faith (e.g., the *Schleitheim Articles* (1527)). Nevertheless, the issue of the normativity of creeds/confessions continued to be controversial among radical Protestants. ‘Without any centralized ecclesial authority and without political approval, confessional statements depended on congregational assent’ (Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith*, p. 75).

<sup>4</sup> See the *Ten Theses of Bern* 2 (1528); the Anabaptist Bernard Rothmann’s ‘Restitution’ (1534); the *First Helvetic Confession* 1–4 (1536); and the *Geneva Confession* 1 (1536).

official decisions above the truth of God [i.e. Scripture],<sup>5</sup> the *Declaration of the Congregational Union of England and Wales* (1833) announced that ‘human traditions, fathers and councils, canons and *creeds* [emphasis mine], possess no authority over the faith and practice of Christians’.<sup>6</sup>

Generally speaking, these were not the reformers of the first generation, but certain later denominational leaders who turned away from the ancient creeds. When the Philadelphia Baptist Association published a confession of faith in 1742, some anti-credalists were horrified that Baptists, too, wrote confessions.<sup>7</sup> They ‘could think of nothing nastier to say than to call it [the creed] a ‘new Mary’: “We need no such virgin Mary to come between us and God.”<sup>8</sup> In time, the sixteenth-century battle-cry *sola scriptura* developed into a slogan, ‘No creed but the Bible!’ as the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention stated in expressing their religious convictions in 1845.<sup>9</sup> How was it that the attitude towards creeds, including some of the most ancient, important, and almost universally accepted Christian statements of faith, changed so drastically?

This article is about what creed as such was taken to be in the period of late antiquity. It ‘zooms in’ on how creed was perceived by those who witnessed to its birth and development. More precisely, on

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<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* 2 vols (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 2, 409; cf. *Savoy Declaration* 1.10 (1658). The *Bohemian Confession* of 1535 has a long Article 15 entitled ‘On Human Traditions’, and it mentions ‘traditions, rites, customs, and Canons’, but creeds are not in this list of despised items (Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 1, 824–26).

<sup>6</sup> Principles of Church Order and Discipline 2, *Bible Hub*: <[https://biblehub.com/library/schaff/the\\_creeds\\_of\\_the\\_evangelical\\_protestant\\_churches/the\\_declaration\\_of\\_the\\_congregational.htm](https://biblehub.com/library/schaff/the_creeds_of_the_evangelical_protestant_churches/the_declaration_of_the_congregational.htm)> [accessed 1 April 2021].

<sup>7</sup> See William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. edn (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Timothy George, ‘Evangelicals and the Mother of God’, *First Things*, 179 (2007), 20–25 (p. 24b).

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 8–12 May, 1845’, *Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives*:

<[http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC\\_Annual\\_1845.pdf](http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1845.pdf)> [accessed 1 April 2021] (p. 19).

‘Amnesia of and suspicion of tradition have been recurring problems in Baptist life’ (Rhyne R. Putman, ‘Baptists, *Sola Scriptura*, and the Place of the Christian Tradition’, in *Baptists and Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. by Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville: B&G Academic, 2020), pp. 27–54 (p. 51)).

the basis of creeds (be those baptismal, declaratory, conciliar, or ‘private’<sup>10</sup>), credal statements, patristic credal commentaries, and other documents,<sup>11</sup> this article first reconstructs the early Christian view of creed<sup>12</sup> and later assesses some of the complications with existing creeds which arguably led to the eventual abandonment of creeds in some churches. The goal is to facilitate a move — even if by a little — beyond the so-called ‘cut-flower faith’,<sup>13</sup> which seems to be quite widespread in current times. A ‘cut-flower faith’ no longer remembers its past, including what ancient creeds used to be and what they were for. It has no diachronic roots and consequently, has little sustaining energy.

### The Birth of Credal Statements/Creeds

In the earliest Christian documents, which eventually became part of the canonical New Testament, one can encounter the idea that Christian faith was something received,<sup>14</sup> deposited,<sup>15</sup> and as such had to be

<sup>10</sup> Reservations about the unfortunate designation ‘private creed’ have been expressed in Tarmo Toom, ‘Ulfila’s Credal Statement and Its Theology’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 29, no. 4 (2021), 525–552, and Christoph Marksches, ‘On Classifying Creed the Classical German Way: “Privat-Bekenntnisse” (“Private Creeds”)', *Studia Patristica*, 63, no. 11 (2013), 259–71.

<sup>11</sup> Apart from patristic credal commentaries, homilies, and conciliar *acta*, the data is largely taken from a multi-lingual, four-volume reference work: Wolfram Kinzig, ed., *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-Related Texts*, Oxford Early Christian Texts, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) (hereafter Kinzig, §x). A fascinating list of more than 200 largely unstudied early medieval texts concerning credal faith is available in Susan A. Keefe, *A Catalogue of Works Pertaining to the Explanation of the Creed in Carolingian Manuscripts*, *Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 63 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Despite all similarities, the provenance of the interrogatory, declaratory, and conciliar creeds was clearly different, and the provenance of eastern and western creeds was likewise somewhat different, but the focus of this article is not on the provenance and differences, but on the patristic perception of creeds in general.

<sup>13</sup> This is a phrase of Ronald Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Rom 6:17; 1 Cor 11:23, 15:1; Gal 1:11–12; 2 Thess 2:15; Jude 3.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14; 2 Pet 2:21; Jude 3. Acts 16:4 contends that Paul and Silas handed over (*paradidomi*) the dogmas (*dogmata*). Origen too pointed out that ‘the holy apostles, in preaching the faith of Christ, delivered with utmost clarity to all believers [...] certain points that they believed to be necessary’ (*PArch.* Praf. 3 in *Origen: On the First Principles*, trans. by John Behr, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), vol. 1, p. 13).

guarded carefully.<sup>16</sup> That is how the apostles — Peter, Paul, John, and others — understood their faith.

There were some attempts to summarise this faith, this received and deposited apostolic *keerygma*, and hence there are various credal statements in the would-be canonical New Testament.<sup>17</sup> Some of these credal statements were linked with baptism.<sup>18</sup> As this rite of initiation developed, a candidate was asked several questions, and with the help of some scriptural statements, the candidate confessed their Christian faith.<sup>19</sup> Later, these interrogatory baptismal creeds, together with catechetical instructions (especially the rites of *traditio* and *redditio symboli*),<sup>20</sup> and the existing ‘rules of faith’,<sup>21</sup> became the basis for the declaratory and conciliar creeds.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although starting to emerge in

<sup>16</sup> Gal 1:6–9, 2:4–8; Col 2:7–8; 2 Tim 1:14; 1 John 2:22; 2 John 1:7.

<sup>17</sup> Heb 4:14 says, ‘Let us hold fast to our confession (*tēs homologias*)’ (cf. 3:1, 10:23; 2 Cor 9:13; 1 Tim 6:12–13; 1 John 4:14–15). Rom 10:10 (‘with the mouth one confesses (*stomati de homologeiat*)’) is referred to by several later homilies on creed (e.g. Augustine, *F. et symb.* 1.1; s. 241.1; 398.1; Peter Chrysologus, s. 56.5). Kelly assesses, ‘There is plenty of evidence in the New Testament to show that the faith was already beginning to harden into conventional summaries’ (John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edn (New York: Longman, 1972), p. 13). For the credal statements in the New Testament, see Kinzig, *Faith in Formulae*, vol. 1, pp. 35–60; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 14–23; Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, vol. 1, pp. 32–36. It is unlikely that any of the confessional statements in the Hebrew Scriptures, including Deut 6:4 or 26:5–9, belonged to a literary genre of a creed (Kinzig, *Faith in Formulae*, vol. 1, pp. 33–34). That is, ancient Israelites did not have sets of multi-clausal creeds or credal statements.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 8:36–38 (textual evidence for verse 37 is not found in p<sup>45</sup>;  $\aleph$ , A, B, C, 33, etc. (Bruce M. Metzger, *The Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1971), pp. 359–60); Acts 16:31–33, 19:4–5. See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 30–52.

<sup>19</sup> Although both formulas continued to be used, the shift from ‘I believe’ to ‘we believe’ came with the emergence of declaratory creeds in the fourth century (Kinzig, *Faith in Formulae*, vol. 1, p. 9, n. 45).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas M. Finn, ‘Introduction’ to *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, ACW 60 (New York: Newman, 2004), pp. 3–10.

<sup>21</sup> *Regula fidei* was a free-worded summary of Christian faith, often with a tripartite structure (no doubt, in conformity with Matt 28:19). These informal accounts of what was ‘taught by Christ’ (Tertullian, *Praesc. haer.* 13) circulated in apologetic and polemical contexts, and continued to exist after creeds had emerged. Just as several gospels were, in a sense, one gospel, so were several and differently worded rules of faith. Edwards compares these early ‘improvised confessions’ (i.e. rules of faith) to a homily, as they repeat ‘the same fundamental truths in sermon after sermon without exact repetition or startling innovation’ (Mark Edwards, ‘Kinzig on the Creeds’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 70, no. 1 (2019), 119–29 (pp. 120–21)).

<sup>22</sup> A convenient multilingual (Greek, Latin, English) collection of documents, including creeds and credal statements from ecumenical councils are Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*,

the second century, creeds, in the proper sense of the word (that is, declarative creeds), were a phenomenon of the fourth century. However, and as already stated above, this article is not about the historical origin and development of creed(s).<sup>23</sup> Rather and again, it is about what creeds were taken to be, about their perceived religious origin.

## Incentives for Abbreviation

The dossier which included the documents of the emerging Christian faith included gospels, collection(s) of the letters of Paul, and other writings. But how was one to express in a nutshell the ‘good news’ as such, which was found in these sets of documents?

In several credal statements, the Old Latin text of Romans 9:28 (‘Completing his word, and abbreviating it equitably, for the Lord will make a brief word (*verbum breviatum*<sup>24</sup>) upon the earth’) was invoked for justifying the making of short summaries of the Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> In *De Incarnatione* 6.4, John Cassian elaborated,

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vol. 1, pp. 155–241, and according to the Roman Catholic counting, Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> For various positions, see Everett Ferguson, ‘Creeds, Councils, and Canons’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 427–45 (pp. 427–34); Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 30–130; Wolfram Kinzig, ‘The Origins of the Roman Creed: New Reflections on an Old Problem’, in *The Bible and the Creed*, ed. by Markus Bockmuehl (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming 2022); Wolfram Kinzig and Markus Vinzent, ‘Recent Research on the Origin of the Creed’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 50, no. 2 (1999), 534–59; Adolf M. Ritter, ‘Creeds’, in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. by Ian Hazlett (Nashville: Abington, 1991), pp. 92–100; Markus Vinzent, ‘Die Entstehung des “Römischen Glaubensbekenntnisses”’, in *Tauffragen und Bekenntnis: Studien zur sogenannten ‘Traditio apostolica’ zu den ‘Interrogationes de fide’ und zum ‘Römischen Glaubensbekenntnis’*, ed. by Wolfram Kinzig, Christoph Marksches, and Vinzent Markus, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 74 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 245–409; Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 21–72.

<sup>24</sup> Some Greek manuscripts, too, add *logon suntetmēmenon* from Isa 10:23 LXX to Rom 9:28.

<sup>25</sup> Origen, *Comm. Rm.* 7.19.3; Anonymous, *Exp. symb.* 3; *Coll. Eus. Hom.* 9.1 (Kinzig, §30); an anonymous fifth-century *Tract. sym.* 6 (Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed*, p. 470); Isidore of Seville, *Sent.* 1.22.1 adds Isa 28:22, ‘I have heard from the Lord God of hosts an abbreviation (*abbreviationem*) upon the earth’ (Kinzig, §39c).

This [i.e. the Apostles' Creed], therefore, is the 'short word (*breviatum verbum*)' which the Lord made, assembling in a few words the faith of both of his testaments, enclosing the meaning of all Scripture in a few brief clauses, constructing his own [creed] out of his own [Scriptures], and rendering the force of the whole law in a most abbreviated and brief formula.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, in Matthew 22:37–39, Jesus himself summed up, or abbreviated, the Law into a double commandment of loving God and neighbour. Obviously, such abbreviation was thereby no less authoritative and 'scriptural' than the whole and unabbreviated Law. Thus, the idea/phrase of *verbum breviatum* from Romans 9:28, combined with Jesus's own example, seemed to warrant the making of summaries of Christian faith; that is, creeds.<sup>27</sup>

There were also practical reasons for composing brief memorable statements, or 'one-liners' of faith — illiteracy and lack of opportunity. One of the earliest figures (ca 350 CE) to attest to the existence of a declaratory creed, Cyril of Jerusalem, explained,

Acquire and observe only [the faith] which is now delivered to you [i.e. the candidates] by the church [and] which has been fortified from all the Scriptures. For, since not everyone is able to read the Scriptures, some being hindered from knowledge by ignorance, and others by want of leisure, we encompass the entire teaching of the faith in a few lines, lest [someone's] soul perish from ignorance.<sup>28</sup>

In order to make sure that everyone understood the short creed (when Latin was no longer a universal vernacular in the West), Haito of Basle mentioned the requirement of learning the Apostles' Creed (and the Lord's Prayer) 'both in Latin and in the vernacular so that what they profess with the mouth might be believed in the heart and understood'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Kinzig, §21.

<sup>27</sup> These two reasons are explicitly mentioned together in Fulgentius of Ruspe, *C. Fab.* 36.1 (Kinzig, §35) and Theodulf of Orleans, *Lib. ord. bapt.* 6.5 (Kinzig, §50).

<sup>28</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catb.* 5.12 (Kinzig, §624a); cf. Niceta of Remesiana, *Sym.* 13; Isidore of Seville, *Ecl. off.* 23.5 (Kinzig, §39a). Augustine too expressed the idea that creed is meant for those initiates who 'have yet to be strengthened by a detailed spiritual study and knowledge of the divine Scriptures' (*F. et symb.* 1.1 [*On Christian Belief*], trans. by Michael G. Campbell, WSA I/8 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), p. 151).

<sup>29</sup> Haito of Basle, *Cap.* 2 (Kinzig, §747a).

## Creed as a Summary of Christian Faith/Scripture

Having some very good reasons for coming up with abbreviations of Christian proclamation, early Christians believed that such abbreviations, that is, creeds and credal statements, were indeed nothing but ‘digests’ of the apostolic *kerygma*.

One of the main meanings of the word *symbolon/symbolum* is a summary of Christian faith,<sup>30</sup> and enforcing this meaning is a recurring theme in patristic literature. For example, Peter Chrysologus taught that the creed was a ‘summary of our faith’, and it concerned ‘the whole mystery of human salvation’;<sup>31</sup> Fulgentius of Ruspe assured his readers that ‘a *symbolum* is [...] a kind of true treaty and a true collection in which the totality of all the Christian faith is briefly established’;<sup>32</sup> bishops at the Council of Ephesus believed that the Creed of Nicaea contained ‘in a few words all that the divine Scriptures have handed down to us concerning religion’;<sup>33</sup> and Isidore of Seville summed up this idea with the words, ‘the whole breadth of Scripture is summed up [...] in the brevity of this creed’.<sup>34</sup>

This means that it was not even thinkable that a baptismal creed confessed something other than, or contrary to, Scripture. Again, patristic authors of all persuasions were quite convinced that what the creed said briefly was what Scripture said in many words and consequently, the scriptural distinction between the God-breathed Scripture and ‘human traditions’ just did not and could not apply to the traditional creed(s).

One should notice here that although there are credal statements in the New Testament, there are almost no statements on Scripture in

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<sup>30</sup> Rufinus, *Exp. sym.* 2; Augustine, *s.* 212.1, *s.* 213.2, *s.* 214.12; Peter Chrysologus, *s.* 27.16; Ps.-Maximus of Turin, *Hom.* 83 (Kinzig, §23). For the various meanings of the word *symbolon*, see Kinzig, §1–80 and Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 52–61.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Chrysologus, *s.* 56.4 (Harold W. Moore, ‘The Baptismal Creed of St. Peter Chrysologus: A Translation of Seven Sermons of St. Peter Chrysologus on the Creed’ (STL thesis, St. Mary’s Seminary, Baltimore, 1950), p. 10).

<sup>32</sup> Fulgentius of Ruspe, *C. Fab.* 36.2 (Kinzig, §35); cf. *Fid. trin.* 4 (Kinzig, §29); Jerome, *C. Io. Hier.* 28 (Kinzig §17); Augustine, *s.* 213.2.

<sup>33</sup> Kinzig, §205.

<sup>34</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Sent.* 1.22.2 (Kinzig, §39c).



ancient creeds. That is, with just a few marginal exceptions, early Christian creeds and credal statements did not include a clause on Scripture. The most obvious reason is that credal statements/rules of faith and canonical Scripture were taken to be largely coterminous. Creeds said what Scripture said, only much more briefly.<sup>35</sup> It was the sixteenth-/seventeenth-century denominational confessions which started to elaborate on Scripture as an article, or better, as the first article of faith in their confessional statements.<sup>36</sup> It was believed that while a creed could have a clause about Scripture, a creed itself was no longer considered to be a *verbum brevium* [*Dei*].

To compose a more-or-less exhaustive list of (extant) quotations supporting the idea that creed is a summary of Scripture would be too long and tedious, but a good number of examples may hammer the point home securely. (Readers should notice here that this conviction was shared by ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretical’ theologians alike.)

Sending his creed to Pope Julius,<sup>37</sup> Marcellus claimed that it represented his faith ‘which I learned and was taught out of the holy Scripture’.<sup>38</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem preached about creed:

For the articles of the faith were not composed as seemed good to men,<sup>39</sup> but the most important points were gathered together from all the Scripture and make up one complete teaching of the faith. Just as the mustard seed in one small grain contains many branches, so also this faith [i.e. the creed] has

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<sup>35</sup> To cite a Baptist scholar, treating ‘the Bible in isolation from the tradition of the church, as it was located in the ancient Rule of Faith, baptismal confessions, and conciliar creeds, would have been incomprehensible to the Christian pastors and thinkers of the patristic age’ (Daniel H. Williams, ed., *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 17).

<sup>36</sup> This was typical of the Reformed confessions: the *First Helvetic Confession* 1–4 (1536); the *Geneva Confession* 1 (1536); the *Second Helvetic Confession* 1.1–9 (1566), the *Irish Articles* 1–7 (1615), and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.1–10 (1647). Pelikan observes, ‘The authority of Scripture eventually came to be seen [...] as the doctrine that underlay and authenticated all other doctrines’ (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 137).

<sup>37</sup> Although in Greek, Marcellus’s creed is the earliest extant example of the declaratory Apostles’ Creed.

<sup>38</sup> Marcellus, *Ep. Iul.* in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 72.2–3 (Frank Williams, ed., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis/Book II and III [Sections 47–80, De Fide]*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 424).

<sup>39</sup> One should notice Cyril’s explicit rejection of the idea that creeds were mere ‘human traditions’.

encompassed all the knowledge of godliness in the Old and New [Testaments] in a few words.<sup>40</sup>

Rufinus contended that for each article in the creed ‘keen researchers will find a vast ocean of testimony [...] in Holy Scriptures’.<sup>41</sup> After all, the creed was constructed ‘out of the living stones and pearls supplied by the Lord’.<sup>42</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia was adamant that ‘the words of the [Nicene] creed contain nothing but an explanation and interpretation of the words found in the teaching of our Lord’.<sup>43</sup> Augustine joined in (having a variant of the Apostles’ Creed, the Creed of Milan, in mind) stating that ‘the words which you have heard [in the creed] are scattered throughout the divine Scriptures’, and ‘everything that you are going to hear in the symbol is already contained in the divine documents of the holy scriptures’.<sup>44</sup> And an eighth-century gospel codex (E, 07) included the creed at the very end of its text; that is, as something that concluded or summed up the text of the gospels!

To continue the same point, but with examples which concern particular teachings, an Armenian fragment put it this way (as if listing the most incredible elements): ‘The Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels have proclaimed that Christ was born of a virgin, passible upon the cross, visible from among the dead, and that he ascended into the heavens and was glorified by the Father and is King forever.’<sup>45</sup> The Macrostich Creed attempted to limit credal statements to only what could explicitly be found in Scripture, ‘for neither is it safe to say that the Son is from nothing (since this is nowhere spoken of him in the

<sup>40</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cath.* 5.12 (Kinzig, §624a); cf. Boethius, *Fid. cath.* 2 (Kinzig, §458).

<sup>41</sup> Rufinus of Aquileia, *Exp. symb.* 18 (*Rufinus: A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. by John N. D. Kelly, ACW 20 (New York: Newman, 1955), p. 53). Or, to put it the other way around, ‘If we search both the Old and New Testament Scriptures we find nothing about God beyond [what is contained in] the creed’ (Etherius of Osma, *Adv. Elip.* 1.87 (Kinzig, §45)).

<sup>42</sup> Rufinus, *Exp. symb.* 2. Niceta of Remesiana likewise claimed that the words of the creed were ‘selected from the whole Scripture and put together for the sake of brevity, they are like precious gems making a single crown’ (*Exp. symb.* 13, *Niceta of Remesiana*, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh, FC 7 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1949), p. 53).

<sup>43</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Comm. sym.* 10 (Alphonse Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Nicene Creed*, Woodbrooke Studies 5 (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009; first published 1932), p. 111).

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, s. 398.1 and 212.2. (*Sermons*, trans. by Edmund Hill, WSA III/10 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1995), p. 455 and WSA III/6 (1990), p. 138).

<sup>45</sup> Kinzig, §109c1.

divinely inspired Scriptures)<sup>46</sup> Quodvultdeus, in discussing the issue of the full divinity of the Son, said, ‘Let us demonstrate from the Scriptures that the Son is called omnipotent just as the Father is.’<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the explicit quotes about the creed being a drastically shortened Scripture, there was a telling phenomenon in which individual articles of faith were stated pretty much as a chain (*catena*) of scriptural phrases or verses.<sup>48</sup> At this point, I would like to provide an illustrative chart in which credal clauses are matched with Scripture (figure 1). It concerns one of the earliest declaratory creeds in Latin (381–382 CE) in *Liber ad Damasum Episcopum* (*Tract.* 2.47–67) of Priscillian of Avila.<sup>49</sup> The clauses in his creed were ‘enforced’ by supporting scriptural quotes, which were introduced by a formula ‘as is written (*sicut scribuntur est*)’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kinzig, §145.

<sup>47</sup> Quodvultdeus, *Hom.* 1.7 (*Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Credal Homilies*, trans. by Thomas Finn, ACW 60 (New York: Newman, 2004), p. 30).

<sup>48</sup> (Pseudo-)Ignatius, *Ep. Phil.* 1.1–3.3 (Kinzig, §98g); *Epist. Ap.* 3 (Kinzig, §103a); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.22.1 (Kinzig, §109b4). Similar examples can be found from later dates and from as theologically different creeds as the Christological section in a creed from the Council of Antioch (Kinzig, §141a), the First Creed of Sirmium (Kinzig, §148), and Gregory of Nyssa, *Ref. Eun.* 18–19 (Kinzig, §187). Many post-Reformation denominational creeds/confessions continued the tradition of confessing their faith mostly with the help of scriptural phrases which were organised according to the respective theological convictions.

<sup>49</sup> See Tarmo Toom, ‘Marcellus of Ancyra, Priscillian of Avila: Their Theologies and Creeds’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 68, no. 1 (2014), 60–81.

<sup>50</sup> A similar chart where the clauses of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed are matched with Scripture can be found in the Appendix of Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation*, pp. 185–86. Priscillian’s creed as set out in figure 1 is as follows: ‘(Believing) in one God, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, buried, on the third day arose again, ascended into the heavens, is seated on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, whence he will come and judge the living and the dead, (believing) the holy church, the Holy Spirit, the saving baptism, (believing) in the remission of sins, (believing) in the resurrection of the flesh.’ Derived from *Priscillian of Avila: The Complete Works*, trans. by Marco Conti, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 71–3. I have added a reference to Acts 1:9 in line 6 of figure 1.

The Creed of Priscillian of Avila
<i>(Credentes) unum Deum Patrem omnipotentem</i> (1 Cor 8:6)
<i>et unum dominum Iesum Christum</i> (1 Cor 8:6)
<i>natum ex Maria virgine ex Spiritu sancto</i> (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23; Lk 1:35)
<i>passum sub Pontio Pilato crucifixum</i> (Isa 53:12; Luke 22:37)
<i>sepultum, tertia die resurrexisse</i> (Zeph 3:8)
<i>ascendisse in caelos</i> (Acts 1:9)
<i>sedere ad dexteram Dei Patris omnipotentis</i> (Acts 7:55)
<i>inde venturum et iudicaturum de vivis et mortuis</i> (Acts 11:1)
<i>(credentes) in sanctam ecclesiam</i>
<i>sanctum Spiritum</i>
<i>baptismum salutare</i> (John 3:5)
<i>(credentes) remissionem peccatorum</i> (1 John 2:12)
<i>(credentes) in resurrectionem carnis</i> (Exod 3:6; Matt 22:31–2; Luke 20:38)

Figure 1: The creed of Priscillian of Avila (created by the author on the basis of Marco Conti; see footnote 50)

Furthermore, eastern creeds often employed the phrase ‘according to Scripture’, although they attached this phrase to various articles of faith: to the Father begetting the Son,<sup>51</sup> Jesus Christ,<sup>52</sup> the incarnation,<sup>53</sup> virgin birth,<sup>54</sup> the full divinity of the Holy Spirit,<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> The Fourth Creed of Sirmium (Kinzig, §157); the Creed of Niké (Kinzig, §159a); the Creed of Constantinople (360) (Kinzig, §160).

<sup>52</sup> The creed of the deposed bishop Macarius of Antioch at the Third Council of Constantinople (Kinzig, §242a).

<sup>53</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgos about the Council of Ephesus, *Coll. Vat.* 170 (Kinzig, §118).

<sup>54</sup> Athanasius, *Syn.* 24.3 (Kinzig, §141a); the ‘Dedication Creed’ (Kinzig, §141b).

<sup>55</sup> (Pseudo-)Liberius, *Ep. Ath.* 2 (Kinzig, §165).

resurrection of the flesh,<sup>56</sup> and even angels.<sup>57</sup> As is well known, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed says ‘according to Scripture’ only in connection with the clause ‘on the third day he rose’ (no doubt because of 1 Cor 15:4).<sup>58</sup> However, while the variant from the second session of the council includes this phrase,<sup>59</sup> the one from the fifth session does not. Accordingly, those Latin translations which follow the second session include the phrase ‘according to Scripture’, and those that follow the fifth session, do not.<sup>60</sup>

To conclude this (lengthy) point, in order to secure the belief that a creed as such was indeed the *verbum breviatum*, at times its clauses, words, and even grammatical constructions were taken from Scripture. For example, creeds usually said, ‘We believe *in* . . .’ rather than ‘We believe *that* . . .’ The formula ‘believing in (*eis*) someone/something’ was a phrase taken directly from the New Testament.<sup>61</sup> In the Latin-speaking world, ‘believing in (*in*)’ plus ablative became a special feature of the Apostles’ Creed. Although there are credal examples which use the preposition ‘in’ in front of every clause,<sup>62</sup> Rufinus made a forceful case that only the clauses about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should have the preposition ‘in’.<sup>63</sup> An Augustinian sermon (244), too, put it succinctly, ‘Believe in the Holy Spirit, believe the holy church’.<sup>64</sup> Faustus of Riez argued in similar vein. Coming to the clause about the church, he asked his opponents, ‘Why do you try to produce a thick fog by

<sup>56</sup> (Pseudo-)Athanasius, *Ep. Lib.* 8 (Kinzig, §150).

<sup>57</sup> John II of Jerusalem, *C. Io. Hier.* 15 (Kinzig, §190a2).

<sup>58</sup> Kinzig, §184e1; cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Fid.* 8 (Kinzig, §174f).

<sup>59</sup> Evidently because the earliest version of the *acta (versio antiqua)* links the creed with the third session, Kinzig consistently follows this tradition. However, and as a matter of fact, the creed was reported in the second session (*The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon: Volume 2*, trans. by Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, Translated Texts for Historians 45 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), vol. 2, pp. 12–13).

<sup>60</sup> Kinzig, §184, I.1–16, and II.17–16, 28–31.

<sup>61</sup> Kinzig, *Faith in Formulae*, vol. 1, pp. 36–41.

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous, *Tract. symb.* (Westra, *The Apostles’ Creed*, p. 365).

<sup>63</sup> Rufinus, *Exp. symb.* 36. See Liuwe H. Westra, ‘Creating a Theological Difference: The Myth of Two Grammatical Constructions with Latin *Credo*’, *Studia Patristica*, 92, no. 18 (2017), 3–14; Henri de Lubac, *The Christian Faith*, trans. by Richard Arnandez (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 133–43. Nevertheless, it did not become a consistent feature in all Latin creeds.

<sup>64</sup> Kinzig, §269.

adding a small syllable; that is “in” [to the other clauses]?<sup>65</sup> In *Carmen* 11.1.36, Venantius Fortunatus elucidated, ‘Where we use the preposition *in*, we recognise the divinity.’<sup>66</sup>

In summary, creeds were taken to be the abbreviations of Christian faith/Scripture, although every abbreviation inevitably was and is someone’s deliberate selection and editing.

## The Apostolic Authority

One ingenious way of demonstrating the authenticity of what was later called the Apostles’ Creed was to connect it directly with the apostles before they went their own ways. In the Middle Ages, there was even a Feast of the Dispersion of the Apostles.<sup>67</sup>

In *Expositio symboli* 2,<sup>68</sup> Rufinus tells the story of how the twelve apostles, before departing from each other and going into the wide world to proclaim the gospel, agreed on the ‘fixed standard’ or ‘brief token’ (i.e. a creed) for securing the unity of their preaching.<sup>69</sup> Each apostle was said to have contributed one of the credal clauses and consequently, there are twelve clauses in the Apostles’ Creed (although there was no consensus about how exactly the structurally Trinitarian Apostles’ Creed divided into twelve clauses).<sup>70</sup> As a result, in later

<sup>65</sup> Faustus of Riez, *Spir. sanct.* 1.2 (Kinzig, §267b2); cf. *Inter. Fid.* (Kinzig, §605) and Pseudo-Maximus of Turin, *Hom.* 83 (Kinzig, §607).

<sup>66</sup> Monumenta Germaniae Historica 4.1 (Berlin: Weidemann, 1881), p. 257.

<sup>67</sup> De Lubac, *The Christian Faith*, p. 36. De Lubac provides a wonderful summary of the story of the twelve apostles providing the Apostles’ Creed on pp. 19–53.

<sup>68</sup> A slightly earlier version of this story is found in an anonymous *Exp. sym.* 3; cf. *Const. Ap.* 6.14 (Kinzig, §182b).

<sup>69</sup> This story is echoed in many documents with ever greater details, such as, Anonymous, *S. symb.* 3 (Kinzig, §27b); Anonymous, *Exp. symb.* 1 (Kinzig, §31); Isidore of Seville, *Orig. off.* 1.23.2 and 5 (Kinzig, §39a); *S. symb. trad.* (Kinzig, §47); Anonymous, *Exp. bapt.* 3 (Kinzig, §63); *Coll. duo. lib.* (Kinzig, §528).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Anonymous, *Exp. s. symb.* 1 (Kinzig, §33); Anonymous, *Exp. symb.* (Kinzig, §48); *Ap. symb.* (Kinzig, §263); Maximus of Turin, *s.* 52.2 (Kinzig, §355); Leo, *ep.* 4b.4 (Kinzig, §360); Etherius of Osmia, *Adv. Elip.* 2.99 (Kinzig, §380). The Trinitarian Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was likewise divided in several ways, from two main sections to thirty-eight individual clauses (Mart Jaanson, ‘Nikaia-Konstantinoopoli usutunnistuse ladinakeelse normteksti grammatiline, teoloogiline ja muusikaline liigendamise’ (doctoral thesis, Tartu University; Dissertationes theologiae universitatis Tartuensis 30, Tartu: Tartu ülikooli kirjastus, 2014), pp. 141–74). A

imagination, and although it varied quite a bit, particular clauses were attributed to particular apostles.<sup>71</sup> The list usually starts with Peter and ends with Matthias or Thomas. At times, the Apostle Paul is included as well.<sup>72</sup>

The Triplex Sacramentary of Zürich claims that ‘the apostles, upon suddenly hearing a sound from the heavens, received the symbol of the one faith and handed the glory of your gospel over to all nations in various languages’,<sup>73</sup> but the strict historicity of such a story is obviously a moot point. John Kelly assesses, ‘Taken literally, the story is unacceptable, although its thesis that the contents of the Church’s creed have the authority of the Apostles behind them is solidly based.’<sup>74</sup> The given story is ‘an uncritical elaboration of the conviction’ that creed as such was/is apostolic.<sup>75</sup>

And this is precisely what counts for the current investigation: the belief that credal clauses somehow extended back to the apostles, many of whom also authored several books of the canonical New Testament. For the third time, it follows that, in its essence, a creed could not have been anything alien, contradictory to the apostolic *kerygma*, and imposed upon Christians by institutional power structures.<sup>76</sup>

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wonderful tool for finding the ‘twelve clauses’ of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in various creeds/confessional statements is the Creedal Syndogmaticon in Pelikan’s *Credo*, pp. 538–70 (also found in the end of all volumes of the *Credo and Confessions*).

<sup>71</sup> See Kinzig, §§364, 373–9, 382–410, plus various later variations. A unique chart is found in an early fifteenth-century manuscript, where the credal clauses, which are attributed to the twelve apostles, are matched with the fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (Kinzig, §428).

<sup>72</sup> Anonymous, *Exp. s. symb.* (Kinzig, §277); a creed in Codex Laon (Kinzig, §420).

<sup>73</sup> Kinzig, §417.

<sup>74</sup> Kelly, *Rufinus*, p. 101, n. 7.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> This is not to deny the later imperial imposition of various creeds and credal statements, starting with Emperor Constantius (Hilary, *Coll. Ar.* A VIII), the laws in *Codex Theodosianus* (Kinzig, §§532–536), Justinian’s edict (Kinzig, §556), the ruling of the Synod of Soissons (Kinzig, §586), John of Biclaro, *Chron.* 2 (Kinzig, §689), and Charlemagne, *Cap. Gen.* 14 (and frag. 2) (Kinzig, §§734–735), but rather to highlight the conviction that creeds derived from the apostles/bishops and not from emperors.

Alternatively, and more accurately in the historical sense,<sup>77</sup> according to *Homilia* 9.1 in *Collectio Eusebiana*, it is said to be the ‘Church Fathers (*ecclesiarum patres*)’ who put together the ‘salvific compendium of few words’ by separating ‘the greatest things in the holy Scriptures from the great things [therein]’.<sup>78</sup> As a result, the creed was compared to ‘one single pouch’ that carried the greatest treasures.<sup>79</sup> The text continues,

Out of concern for the salvation of the nations, they [i.e. the fathers of the church] collected testimonies, laden with divine mysteries, from various books of the Scriptures [...] assembled short and clear expressions [...] and called this collection a *symbolum*. Thus, a single precious collection was made from the canonical texts, thrifty with words, but rich in meaning, and the power of the entire corpus of each testament was poured into a few phrases.<sup>80</sup>

As one can see, the creed was perceived to be traditional in the best sense of this word, extending back to the fathers and ultimately to their predecessors — the apostles, the writers of the books of the New Testament.

## The Divine Authority?

In order to affirm the apostolic, in fact the divine, provenance of the Christian/apostolic *keerygma* (Gal 1:11–12; 1 Cor 11:23), an even stronger claim was to assert that, just like Scripture, the creed was inspired.<sup>81</sup> The logic here was that a summary of the inspired Scripture was as inspired as Scripture itself. Hence its divine authority . . . and here, perhaps, many make the decision to not read this article any further.

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<sup>77</sup> For the positions of modern credal scholars on the time and origin of the Apostles’ Creed, see Markus Vinzent, *Der Ursprung des Apostolikums in Urteil der kritischen Forschung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 60–83.

<sup>78</sup> Kinzig, §30. The bishops at Chalcedon emphasised likewise that the faith confessed by the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople was that of the ‘fathers’ (Price and Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 2, pp. 10–13). Statements like these may indicate ‘a certain critical resistance to the legend’ (De Lubac, *The Christian Faith*, p. 29).

<sup>79</sup> Kinzig, §30.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. Pseudo-Faustus of Riez, *s.* 2 (Kinzig, §34).

<sup>81</sup> This is stated in univocal terms in Etherius of Osma and Beatus of Liébana, *Adv. Elip.* 1.87 (Kinzig, §45); *S. symb. trad.* (Kinzig, §47); Anonymous, *Exp. bapt.* 3 (Kinzig, §63); Anonymous, *Exp. symb.* 1 (Kinzig, §74); a creed of the Synod of Autun (Kinzig, §581).



Nevertheless, Pope Leo knew that the ‘evangelical creed’ was ‘inspired by the Lord [and] instituted by the apostles [...] and not made by human expression of wisdom’.<sup>82</sup> Faustinus maintained that ‘our fathers in Nicaea wrote with the force of the Holy Spirit’.<sup>83</sup> The Creed of an Alexandrine apocrisiarius claimed, in turn, that the confessional statements of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus were ‘evangelical and apostolic proclamations, which by the divine inspiration contains the only true and orthodox faith’.<sup>84</sup> In his instructions to the Council of Constantinople in 448 CE, Emperor Theodosius II wrote that ‘the creed was proclaimed correctly and under divine inspiration by our fathers, the 318 [fathers] who convened at Nicaea’.<sup>85</sup>

Again, the argument in this article is not that the divine inspiration of creeds was or is a self-evident and settled matter; one can only point out that this was the prevalent conviction in the early church. And such conviction is yet another indicator that the fathers just did not operate with the distinction between the God-breathed Scripture and supposedly ‘human-made’ creeds.<sup>86</sup> For them, Scripture and creed were basically the same thing in a different format. Or, as the early twentieth-century poet-theologian Charles Williams once said, the Christian faith ‘had become a Creed, and it remained a Gospel’.<sup>87</sup>

## Things Get Complicated

Despite being regarded as summaries of apostolic teachings/Scripture,

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<sup>82</sup> Leo, *Tract.* 98 (Kinzig, §255g).

<sup>83</sup> Faustinus, *Lib. prec.* 3 (Kinzig, §354).

<sup>84</sup> *Coll. Avel.* 10 (Kinzig, §220).

<sup>85</sup> Kinzig, §538; cf. Pope Vigilius, *ep.* 15 (Kinzig, §444); the creed of Tarasius (Kinzig, §245c).

<sup>86</sup> As this article is appearing in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, it should be mentioned that the articles in a special edition of *Review and Expositor* entitled ‘Baptist Confessions of Faith’ presuppose a fundamental distinction between Scripture and creeds. That is, post-Reformation denominational creeds are not taken to be *verbum brevium Dei* (and perhaps rightly so) and consequently, it makes sense to speak about ‘the higher authority of the Bible’ (James L. Garrett, ‘Biblical Authority According to Baptist Confessions of Faith’, *Review and Expositor*, 76, no. 1 (1979), 43–54 (pp. 43–44)). But what does not make much sense is applying this distinction to the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (London: Longmans & Green, 1939), p. 37.

there were several complications with creeds, which in turn contributed to the eventual abandonment of them by at least some later Christians. To begin with, there were many different creeds, and many different creeds with contradictory theologies,<sup>88</sup> although all of them appealed to apostolic authority.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, both religious and secular power-structures started determining the acceptance and the right interpretation of creeds. Consequently, something which was intended to be the instrument of unity, at times turned out to be the instrument of division and exclusion.

Church fathers were obviously very much aware of the fact that, by the end of the fourth century, there were many contradictory creeds to choose from. Apparently, Scripture could be summarised in various ways. Early on, Irenaeus was aggravated that Gnostics ‘try to draw their proof not only from the Gospels and the writing of the apostles, changing the interpretations and twisting the exegesis, but also from the law and the prophets’.<sup>90</sup> Tertullian was worried that, as his heretical opponents formed their opinions from Scripture, it merely created the deceptive aura of being scriptural.<sup>91</sup> An encyclical letter to the bishops of Egypt cautioned, ‘For even though they [i.e. the “Eusebians”] may write with phrases from the Scriptures, do not endure their writing!’<sup>92</sup>

After all, there were such things as ‘heretical creeds’.<sup>93</sup> When various drafts of the creed were presented to bishops at the Council of

<sup>88</sup> Hilary lamented (and primarily, he had the conciliar creeds of the post-Nicene period in mind) that ‘after custom began to create new things, rather than holding to what was accepted’, the inevitable result was the plurality of creeds, which no longer followed the gospels but the spirit of the time (Hilary, *Lib. Const.* 4.3 (Kinzig, §151e1)). That is, the existing creeds no longer confessed the traditional beliefs, but introduced theological ‘novelties’.

<sup>89</sup> The alternative traditions too claimed to rest on apostolic witness. Ptolemy contended that his teaching was backed up with direct ties to the apostles (*Ep. Fl.* 7.9), and a fourth-century apocryphal *The History of Simon Cephas, the Chief of the Apostles* 5.2 claimed that ‘the true teaching was with them [i.e. with the apostles]’ (Tony Burke and Brent Landau, eds, *New Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), vol. 1, p. 376).

<sup>90</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.3.6 (Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 62).

<sup>91</sup> Tertullian, *Praesc. haer.* 15.

<sup>92</sup> Athanasius, *Ep. episc.* 8.1 (Kinzig, §153).

<sup>93</sup> Curiously, this phrase (in the singular) comes from a heteroousian, Philostorgius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.7 (Kinzig, §80). *Acta* IV.81 of the Council of Constantinople II likewise cited the ‘criminal creed’

Nicaea, the one by those ‘who sided with Arius’ was ‘torn to pieces by all and was declared to be spurious and false’.<sup>94</sup> The creed presented by Eusebius of Caesarea allegedly had the same fate.<sup>95</sup> Augustine later observed, ‘No small number of heretics have attempted to insinuate their poisonous doctrines into those brief sentences which constitute the creed.’<sup>96</sup>

The point is that theologically alternative appeals to Scripture were not only a possibility, but an actuality. That is, a different set of fundamental Scripture verses, amounting to different theologies, could be put forward as the framework for a creed. Accordingly, a particular set of selected scriptural texts in a creed could turn out to be ‘orthodox’ or ‘heterodox’, pro-Nicene or anti-Nicene.<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, one could pick from Scripture different texts and create different lists of normative textual hierarchies.<sup>98</sup> A particularly clear example of this phenomenon is the creed of Serdica. It begins with an elimination of a suspect interpretation of the key text of the eastern subordinationists — John 14:28 (‘Father is greater than the Son’) — and adds immediately a refutation of a ‘false’ interpretation of its own key text:

But this is their blasphemous and corrupt interpretation, they argue contentiously that he [i.e. Christ] said, ‘I and my Father are one’ (John 10:30)

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of Theodore of Mopsuestia. And the New Testament itself urged everyone to be cognisant of the fact that there were false prophets, teachers, and apostles (2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1; 2 Cor 11:13).

<sup>94</sup> Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 1.7.15 (Kinzig, §135a1).

<sup>95</sup> Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 1.8.1 (Kinzig, §135a2).

<sup>96</sup> Augustine, *F. et symb.* 1.1.

<sup>97</sup> For example, and respectively, Hilary, *Lib. Const.* 11 (Kinzig, §151e2) and Eunomius, *Exp. fid.*

<sup>98</sup> Several years ago, at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, there was a session about teaching introductory courses for master’s students in theology. Among other rather bizarre things proposed, a professor of a prominent ivy-league school recommended the following task: every incoming student should compose their own creed, which can then be discussed and analysed. Well, does not the *Definitio fidei* of the Council of Chalcedon rule, ‘Those who dare either to compose another creed or even to promulgate or teach or hand down another creed [...] are to be anathematized’ (Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, pp. 87–87\*; cf. Canon 7 of the Council of Ephesus)? Hilary of Poitiers cautioned against people who ‘suit the faith to themselves rather than receive it’ (*Trin.* 8.1, *Saint Hilary of Poitiers: The Trinity*, trans. by Stephen McKenna, FC 25 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2002), p. 274).

on account of [their] harmony and concord and not as the unity of their hypostasis, which is one between the Father and the Son.<sup>99</sup>

A *Libellus fidei* attributed to Ambrose, in turn, starts out with John 10:30 and later applies John 14:28 to the incarnation.<sup>100</sup> And indeed, it does make a huge difference whether one begins constructing one's trinitarian credal statement with John 10:30 or 14:28!

Furthermore, selecting and highlighting certain Scripture verses was inevitably and already a matter of interpretation, and naturally not all interpretations arrived at the same result. For example, Tertullian argued against his opponent, who substituted a preposition 'in a sense not found in the holy Scriptures'.<sup>101</sup> While the creed was recited in an early anonymous *Expositio symboli* 5, it raised the issue, 'This is what the divine Scriptures have: ought we, with reckless mind, overpass the limits of the Apostles?'<sup>102</sup>

In short, it no longer sufficed to line up certain verses of Scripture as the structure of a creed. It did not suffice, because what Scripture exactly said was not self-evident and equally clear to everyone. Yet, no matter what kind of theology the authors of creeds represented, everyone was convinced of the fact that their creeds confessed that which Scripture (and the apostles) taught.<sup>103</sup>

Consequently, some sort of hermeneutical/theological criterion was desperately needed for assessing the adequacy of operating with a selected combination of scriptural proof-texts as summaries of Christian faith. Something had to secure that a given creed as a summary of

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<sup>99</sup> Kinzig, §144a2. Evidently, this is how Marcellus understood John 10:30 (Toom, 'Marcellus of Ancyra, Priscillian of Avila', pp. 64–65 and pp. 70–71).

<sup>100</sup> Kinzig, §513.

<sup>101</sup> Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 20.1 (Kinzig, §111d3). It concerned the phrase that Christ was born 'through a virgin' vis-à-vis Christ was born 'from a virgin'.

<sup>102</sup> The expected answer was, 'God forbid! Of course not!' But what exactly were the limits (cf. Prov 22:28)?

<sup>103</sup> 'Heretics' likewise claimed to be scriptural: Origen, *Dial. Herac.* 1 (Kinzig, §120a); Arius, *Ep. Eus.* (Kinzig, §131c); Asterius, *Frag.* 9 (Kinzig, §137a); Apollinarius of Laodicea in Athanasius(?), *Ep. Jon.* 3 (Kinzig, §164b).

Scripture was indeed scriptural and ‘orthodox’. And this brings up, among other things, the importance of an interpretative tradition.<sup>104</sup>

Irenaeus taught that Scripture had to be interpreted ‘in company with those who are presbyters in the Church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine’.<sup>105</sup> After confessing the Creed of Nicaea, the bishops at the Council of Ephesus felt the need to add a patristic *florilegium* for its correct interpretation:

Since some pretend to confess and accept it while at the same time distorting the force of its expressions to their own opinion and so evading the truth [...] it has proved necessary to add testimonies from the holy and orthodox fathers that can fill out the meaning they have given to the words.<sup>106</sup>

Vincent of Lérins patiently explained that Scripture could not be adequately understood apart from church tradition (after all, Scripture was the apostolic tradition written down!).

The understanding of the Holy Scripture must conform to the single rule of catholic teaching — and this especially in regard to those questions upon which the foundations of all catholic dogma are laid.<sup>107</sup>

To cite a later example as well where the importance of the interpretative tradition is clearly acknowledged, Cassiodorus insisted that Scripture had to be studied with its ‘orthodox’ commentary tradition. It was of paramount importance that Christians read Scripture ‘together with its commentators’, precisely because it provided the trusted interpretative tradition.<sup>108</sup>

In fact, since the second century, there had been a debate about whose interpretative tradition was on the side of the apostles/Scripture.

<sup>104</sup> It was not a sequential process — first the creeds and after that the interpretative tradition. Rather, it was a kind of synchronous hermeneutical circle where texts and interpretative tradition(s) interacted.

<sup>105</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.32.1.

<sup>106</sup> Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, pp. 64–65\*.

<sup>107</sup> Vincent of Lérins, *Comm.* 29 (*Vincent of Lérins*, trans. by Rudolph E. Morris, FC 7 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1949), p. 324). I have changed the capitalisation of the word ‘catholic’.

<sup>108</sup> Cassiodorus, *Inst.* 1.24.1 (*Cassiodorus: Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning; and, On the Soul*, trans. by James W. Halporn, Translated Texts for Historians 42 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), p. 156). Cf. John of Damascus, *Exp. fid.* 2 (Kinzig, §243b); the creed of the Council of Rimini (Kinzig, §564a).

As Canon One of Hippolytus announces, ‘We have cut them [i.e. their opponents] off because they disagree with the Holy Scriptures, the word of God, and with us, the disciples of the Scriptures.’<sup>109</sup> Alternative interpretations were resolutely rejected as unscriptural and, thus, heretical. Condemnation 11 at the Council of Constantinople II (553 CE) anathematised the interpretations of Christian faith by Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinarius, Nestorius, Eutyches, Origen ‘and all those who have thought or now think in the same way as the aforesaid heretics’.<sup>110</sup>

Space does not allow an elaboration on yet another intriguing issue: ‘Can the already existing, purportedly inspired, and thus sacrosanct ancient creeds be updated?’ The best known examples are the Apostles’ Creed (R, or the early forms of the Apostles’ Creed → T (*textus receptus*))<sup>111</sup> and the Nicene Creed (Nicaea → Constantinople, and the eventual addition of *filioque*).<sup>112</sup> Even though some creeds included an explicit warning against ‘adding’ anything to or ‘removing’ anything from them (cf. Deut 4:2; Rev 22:18–19),<sup>113</sup> the fact of the matter was that not only new words and phrases, but entire sections were added to or omitted from the ancient creeds.<sup>114</sup> Here two contradictory yet serious concerns tended to clash: 1) the need to exclude new heretical ideas/interpretations with a more precise and elaborate wording of a

<sup>109</sup> Canons of Hippolytus (Kinzig, §138).

<sup>110</sup> Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, pp. 199–199\*.

<sup>111</sup> In one of the earliest attestations of the Apostles’ Creed, in Rufinus’s *Expositio symboli*, the Roman creed is compared to a slightly different creed of Aquileia. Westra’s monograph *The Apostles’ Creed* is a meticulous assessment of the many regional variants of the Apostles’ Creed (especially, pp. 99–276, Appendix II pp. 539–62).

<sup>112</sup> At the Council of Constantinople, bishops admitted that they confessed the creed ‘in broader terms’ (*Ep. Const.* in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, pp. 29–29\*). Nevertheless, the original Creed of Nicaea continued to be used for quite some time after its updated version gained prominence.

<sup>113</sup> Anonymous (Ambrose?), *Exp. symb.* 7 (Kinzig, §15a2); Council of Ephesus (Kinzig, §205); a statement of faith at the Council of Rimini (Kinzig, §564a).

<sup>114</sup> The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE) has soteriological and pneumatological sections which are missing in the Creed of Nicaea (325 CE), and it has omitted the phrases, such as ‘from the *ousia* of the Father’, ‘God from God’, ‘all things in heaven and earth’, as well as the anathemas.

creed, and 2) the need to preserve the ‘original’<sup>115</sup> form of the creed for the sake of the *koinonia* with previous Christian generations (*communio sanctorum*).<sup>116</sup> The first justified the desire to ‘update’ the creeds and the second cautioned against ever changing anything in the ancient creeds.

## Conclusion

In time, some western Christians no longer took the creed as such to be what the early Christians had taken it to be. They started highlighting the well-known problematic aspects of the traditional creeds:

- that creeds and confessions of faith were increasingly distinguished from the canonical Scripture;
- that there were just too many creeds, or too many versions of creeds, even if the ‘heretical’ ones were excluded;
- that the creeds did not always prove to be what they claimed to be;<sup>117</sup>
- that at times the creeds were imposed by emperors;<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Quotation marks are used here because there was never a single *Urtext* for creeds. We either do not have it at all, or in the case of conciliar creeds, several parallel versions were prepared by different notaries.

<sup>116</sup> The same reason is behind the proposals by Steven R. Harmon, ‘Baptist Confessions and the Patristic Tradition’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 29, no. 4 (Winter, 2002), 349–358.

<sup>117</sup> It concerns the designations ‘Apostles’ Creed’ and ‘Athanasian Creed’ (see Vinzent, *Der Ursprung des Apostolikums*, pp. 17–18, 80). De Lubac cites Harduinus, *Conc. coll.* 9:842–3, where the Greeks resisted the imposed union with the western church (Council of Florence, 1438), ‘We neither profess nor even know this Apostles’ Creed; if it had existed, the Book of Acts would have mentioned it’ (*The Christian Faith*, p. 47). One can realise here that what Augustine had preached to catechumens, who received the (Apostles’) creed (*traditio symboli*), had somehow become hazy, ‘The things you are going to receive [...] are not new things which you haven’t heard before. I mean, you are quite used to hearing them in the holy scriptures and in sermons in church.’ (s. 214.1, *Sermons*, WSA III/6 (1993), p. 150)

<sup>118</sup> For the messy story of the post-Nicene period, see Carlos R. Galvão-Sobrinho, *Doctrine and Power: Theological Controversy and Christian Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 125–51, and for the equally messy story of the Creed of Nicaea (325 CE) gaining its normativity, Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea*, pp. 13–26. Matthew Tindal, an eminent English deist, observed, ‘[I]t is plain from the history that the ambitious, domineering part of the clergy, the imposers of creeds, canons, and constitutions, have proved to be the common plagues of mankind’ (cited after Pelikan, *Credo*, p. 499).

- that creeds were regarded as prescriptive and religiously normative;<sup>119</sup>
- that creeds were associated with the church which was believed to have ‘fallen’;<sup>120</sup>
- that although occasionally updated, the official and fixed character of creeds seemed too restrictive of the free operations of the Spirit;<sup>121</sup>
- that creed did not include much about soteriology and said basically nothing about Jesus’s ethical teachings;<sup>122</sup>
- that the ancient creeds also did not include the clauses on various favourite doctrinal issues which preoccupied a given movement;<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> At the first ecumenical council, ‘the bishops were, for the first time, required to *subscribe* by their own hand to a *fixed formula*, setting out the orthodox faith and cursing those holding deviant opinions’ (emphases original) (Wolfram Kinzig, ‘What’s in a Creed? A New Perspective on Old Texts’, *Studia Patristica* 125 (2021), 75–96). Curiously, contemporary Christians who are vehemently against accepting the authority of any creed next to that of Scripture, do not mind pledging allegiance to their own statements of faith. Southern Baptist Convention seminaries require ‘affirming and signing’ their statements of faith, and the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) Board of Ministerial Standing requires that everyone ‘must subscribe without mental reservation to the Statement of Faith of the EFCA and agree to reaffirm that conviction every five years’, point IV.2 of ‘Credentialing: Ministerial License(s), EFCA <[https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2016/10/efca\\_vocational\\_ministry\\_licen\\_se\\_packet.pdf](https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2016/10/efca_vocational_ministry_licen_se_packet.pdf)> [accessed 1 April 2021].

<sup>120</sup> The proposed timeframe when this allegedly happened varied, but many who operated with such a notion believed it had happened in the fourth century — right at the time of the emergence of the declaratory and conciliar creeds.

<sup>121</sup> Soul liberty, rejection of ecclesiastical/priestly mediation, and ‘becoming like little children’ (Matt 18:3) seemed not to fit well with the standardised Apostles’ Creed (I (*textus receptus*)) and with the philosophically more sophisticated wording of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. And the very end of the Athanasian Creed (‘Everyone must believe it, firmly and steadfastly; otherwise he cannot be saved’) seemed just unacceptable.

<sup>122</sup> In connection with creeds, the above-used designation ‘summary of Christian faith’ has to be taken with a grain of salt. The reason is that creeds say very little about soteriology and ecclesiology, as well as about Christian conduct (Kinzig, ‘What’s in a Creed?’). And after all, which articles of faith should make up the summary of Christian faith?

<sup>123</sup> One need only compare the clauses of the post-Reformation statements of faith with those of the ancient creeds and the difference becomes crystal clear. One of the best-known Baptist confessions, the Second London Confession of Particular Baptists (1689), has thirty-two clauses over-against the traditional twelve clauses of the Apostles’ Creed. See <<https://www.1689.com/confession.html>> [accessed 1 April 2021]. One of the primary



- and that individual ‘soul competency’ somehow mattered more than the established consensuses and ecclesial authority.

All these reasons, as well as several others, contributed to the fact that eventually not only ancient creeds, but creeds/confessions as such, became suspect at least in some churches. Due to the contrary understanding of Scripture and tradition, significantly longer denominational confessions,<sup>124</sup> as well as new and relatively ‘baggage-free’ confessional/covenantal statements among the followers of the ‘cut-flower faith’, seemed theologically safer options than trusting the ancient summaries of Scripture, which of course were never intended to compete with Scripture, but which nevertheless came to be perceived as something distinct from and even contrary to Scripture. Yet the Apostles’ Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed should be perceived as they were meant to be perceived — *verbum breviatum* [Dei] — and be confessed in worship services together with the wider Christian community.<sup>125</sup>

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reasons for the composition of denominational creeds/confessions was that the ancient creeds did not ‘speak directly to numbers of theological issues arising in the reformatory times’ (William L. Lumpkin, ‘The Nature and Authority of Baptist Confessions of Faith’, *Review and Expositor*, 76, no. 1 (1979), 17–28 (p. 17)). On p. 24, Lumpkin lists ecclesiology, the ordinances of the Lord, preaching/missions, and freedom of conscience.

<sup>124</sup> Putman, ‘Baptists, *Sola Scriptura*, and the Place of the Christian Tradition’, pp. 28–33, 44–51.

<sup>125</sup> Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), pp. 99–105; Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), pp. 8–10, 34–36, 163–165; Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 180–181. In their ‘Proposal’ (No 7), even (some?) Southern Baptists announce, ‘We encourage the ongoing affirmation, confession, and catechetical use of the three ecumenical creeds [...] We believe these confessional documents express [...] the deposit of faith taught in Holy Scripture and received by the church throughout space and time’ (although the adjective ‘ecumenical’ should not be used in connection with the Apostles’ Creed and the Athanasian Creed). (Emerson et al., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, p. 354)