Chapter 8

**Clean Up Your Acts**

Like the book of Acts, this section is about tying up loose ends and looking to what comes next. The Apostles gave us the official climbing wall of Faith, and pointed us the way in which we should follow them up to the top. There have been some side trips though, missteps and even some falls. We began this work setting a foundation for understanding creeds. We have come full circle and are now about to explore the creed, but let us take a moment and integrate the theory and the history we have spoken of so far in order to give a firm footing for exploring the language and meaning of the creed. The climb can be treacherous so good footholds are a must!

**God**

And we might as well start at the beginning. We have spoken together briefly on this subject but we should say that before we begin anything we can say, all of our language, is focused on a mystery that said language is insufficient to fully grasp much less comprehend. This will not be a scientific explanation of God, or one word explanations, or trite euphemisms, or platitudes. These are hard concepts and they are not completely understood by anyone.

Thomas Aquinas said that there are basically three ways to talk about the mystery. He basically starts by saying that anything we say about God is basically automatically wrong, because our language comes from our experience which means that it can only express human experience and understanding. We would call his thinking *via negativa*, wherein we can really only say with certainty *what God is not*. To understand this better we can take a moment and expound on his thought. He logically lays it out in three easy to follow steps. The first, based in Medieval Skepticism is that every positive statement about God must be discounted. That is to say, as soon as we say something like “God is good” we are applying our understanding of human “goodness” which by definition is nothing compared to God’s goodness. The second step is, after discounting the positive statement in and of itself we can now make a *limited* statement which is based in the *similarity* of Creation to the Creator. We can say that God must be good because there is a current of goodness which is observable within His Creation. The final step is to then extrapolate that idea of similar goodness out to the nth degree and make that our understanding of the goodness of God. The idea being that we go beyond the language we use to the mystery we cannot fathom.

That said, there is another important fact that we must keep in mind: monotheism. There is only one God. I guess we can technically ignore Thomas on this statement, and go with the positive here. Not only is there one God that God is one (*Dt* 4:35, 6:4; *Mk* 12:29&32). While this is not an innovation just by the Jews, it does come to us definitively as Revelation from them. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) tells us this and show again and again that any other gods have no power and are empty, inferior, human controlled understandings and are not the mystery of the One God.

Greek and Roman understandings of God and the nature of Creation differ greatly from this Hebraic understanding. The Demiurge and Logos exist within the universe as something created from the ether. With the Hebrew God we speak of God as separate from Creation. We use the term *ex nihilo*, as everything which is not God as coming *from nothing*. God creates and is not created. Once He creates, He cares for that Creation, which leads us to our next topic.

**The Economy**

As the political sign said “It’s the economy, stupid” and salvation is no different, except probably for the ‘stupid’ part.

If you recall, “economy” in this sense has nothing to do with the “wages of sin”, but is more about *how something is accomplished*. The ‘economy of Salvation’ talks about how salvation happens, what means and vehicles contribute to and facilitate the action of God to repair the Fall. It also includes our role and responsibilities as the Church.

But just what is that “economy”? Two terms come first: Soteriology and Eschatology. Soteriology is the study of salvation and Eschatology is the study of the ‘ends’ or purpose of something. Each looks at the questions of the economy from different angles but it ends up being the same truth. And speaking of terms, the term “economy” itself comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* which literally means “management of a household” (or “stewardship” as it would also be understood in Jesus’ time). It would be the word used to describe how someone conducts their household’s affairs as well as how they manage the aspects of their life. Theologically then, it refers to God’s management of Creation and humanity, through His self-Revelation to the world, in the context of time, for the sake of the salvation of said Creation and humanity in particular.

What that means is that we couch the economy within the actions of God. One of the first actions we see is His covenants with individuals and eventually with the whole people of Israel. A covenant is a contract, a solemn agreement between two parties, usually a ruler and any vassals they have, involving mutual commitments and/or guarantees. God takes that human contract and understanding and uses it to help us understand our relationship with Him. There have been many covenants between God and humans; specifically we can see those made with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, David, and Moses and the whole people of Israel. In this last one, known as the Sinai Covenant, God reveals His Law, its commitments and guarantees. This theme is carried on through the Prophets. We Christians see Jesus as the next (and final) step in the covenants of God – what we call the “New Testament”. Christ establishes this new and eternal covenant through his sacrificial death and Resurrection. Our Christian understanding is that this economy has been carried out, continues today, and will never pass away. Finally, because this is true, no new public revelation is to be expected before we die and Christ returns to call all things back to himself and return them to the Father.

At the risk of beating this idea to death, the Church Fathers, who teach us about the economy, distinguish *oikonomia* from theology. *Oikonomia* refers to God’s actions: creating and governing as well as the places it is manifest – in Jesus and his Body the Church; *theologia* refers to the mystery of the internal life of that God, especially in the form of Trinity.

**Creeds**

Okay so what does that have to do with the price of tea in China?[[1]](#footnote-1) We have bandied the term about in this work but now we get down to it. To refresh our memories, Creeds generally have statements that clarify beliefs, and they perform two major functions: one, to catechize and the second and most often used, to oppose the “errors” popular at the time. The Apostle’s Creed of the 1st-2nd centuries focuses heavily on refuting Gnostic teachings; the Nicene Creed, composed about 3 centuries later, is mainly directed against the Arian teachings popular at the time.

Creeds then are the profession of the Faith, external, public declarations. When Tertullian (2nd century) professes the nature of his Faith before the Roman authorities, he is not fighting heresy but he is emphasizing the tenets of the Faith in contrast to Roman legal and religious belief.

*…worship the God of the Christians. We hold him to be from the beginning the one creator and maker of the whole creation, of things seen and things unseen. We worship also the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He was foretold by the prophets as the future herald of salvation for the human race and the teacher of distinguished disciples. For myself, since I am a human being, I consider that what I say is insignificant in comparison with his infinite godhead. I acknowledge the existence of a prophetic power, for the one I have just spoken of as the Son of God was the subject of prophecy. I know that the prophets were inspired from above when they spoke of his coming among men. (Tertullian’s trial ~165)*

When Cyprian (3rd century) comes forward it is really a statement of orthodoxy.

*There is one God, and Christ is one, and there is one Church, and one chair founded upon the rock by the word of the Lord. Another altar cannot be constituted nor a new priesthood be made, except the one altar and the one priesthood. Whosoever gathers elsewhere, scatters. Whatsoever is appointed by human madness, so that the divine disposition is violated, is adulterous, is impious, is sacrilegious. Depart far from the contagion of men of this kind and flee from their words, avoiding them as a cancer and a plague, as the Lord warns you and says, "They are blind leaders of the blind. But if the blind lead the blind, they shall both fall into the ditch." [Matthew 15:14]* (*Epistle* 39)

One of the points we keep in mind with Tradition and things like the creeds is that if Jesus had returned quickly, as many in the Early Church anticipated, then there would have been no need for anything else other than the Hebrew Scriptures and Tradition of the “Old Testament” and Apostolic teachings. Christianity (and its variants) is probably the only religion which relies upon creeds. They are important because they are the part of the mystery of our Communion.

We need to think of creeds in the whole sacramental context. We are a Body of individuals. This mystery reflects the mystery of the Trinity. As one Body we share in the mystery of the Body and Blood. Creeds are part and parcel of our unity of our comm-unity, our common unity. Creeds then are *statements* of Communion just as the Eucharist is the *action* of Communion.

***Personae***

The Trinity, which comprises the first three-quarters of the Creed, is, as the name implies, a triad of “persons”. But just what is “personhood”. The term ‘person’ (*prosopon* in Greek, *persona* in Latin), while an old word, is not an old term theologically. This is one case where the notion rises strictly out of Christian theology; that is to say, it developed from the interchange between the Revelation of the mystery of God (Faith) and human thought, not from a philosophical tradition.

While there is a difference between “*individuum*” and “*personae*”, in ancient Greek and Roman thought there was really no concept of person as we use it today (as denoting an individual) or as in the Christian theological sense (denoting a person of the Trinity). If we think back to Plato or Aristotle, the community was everything. In that sense then, there is no philosophical counterpart to the notion. It is not that there are not individual things like people or souls, it is just that those things are in relationship to whole. Initially, the term "person" denoted a mask, or the wearer of the mask, during theatrical or religious festivals in honor Persephone. On the stage, "persona" could be used to mean either the actor who wears the mask, or the role the actor is playing. Eventually it also came to have a legal sense as well, but it is the idea of “role” which most probably lends itself to the later use.

The Fathers preferred the term *hypostasis* to *prosopon* for designating the divine persons. We will deal a bit more with this later, but suffice it to say *hypostasis* has a more ontological flavor than does *prosopon* and so would have more appeal to the Fathers. In that way it is more of a ‘Unity of Three’ where it is understood that while God is one, each person is distinct. Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century) puts it this way: “*The Son is not the Father, because there is only one Father, but He is what the Father is; the Holy Spirit, although he proceeds from God, is not the Son, because there is only one Only Begotten Son, but He is what the Son is.*” (*Orationes*)

Tertullian (2nd century) seems to be the first to use the term “person” in a theological way stating “*one being in three persons*” (*una substantia tres personae – Against Heresy*) and using the term several time in his work *Against Praxeas*. Still the term is not utilized by the early Fathers.

And while we are on about understanding words (and by way of example of the premise), the attribution of masculine and feminine genders to God confuses many people today. Looking back to our note from Thomas, we must move beyond our statement of God as “He”[[2]](#footnote-2) and look into the mystery of God. The limitation of language is real, and many times heresy has arisen from taking the words we use at face value. So for this and any other linguistic conundrums, we can reflect the exasperation of Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century) when he was discussing things with the Arians and arguing against the used word as having only the meaning contained within the word *“…you would supposed our God is male…because the word [Father] is? Or the Spirit neuter because he neither begets nor bears? Or that God cohabited with his own will [a feminine word in Greek]…*” (*Orations* 31)

***Ecclesia***

The last quarter of the Creed deals with the Church, *ecclesia* in Greek – hence the name *ecclesiology* for the study of the Church. Odd as this may seem, the nature of the Church is also Revelation. The Church is more than a gathering of like-minded people who share a common interest. It is not a book club but an entity which, together, makes up the Body of Christ. Like God[[3]](#footnote-3), it is a real thing, immanent in the World yet transcendent of it.

That the Church is part of the Creed tells us that its definition was also problematic.

***The Pertinent Points***

Historically and theologically, the Creed plays several roles:

1. It is a narration of our sacred stories.
2. It is a means and foundation of our interpretation of Scripture.
3. It firmly places our understanding of *everything* within a Christian context.
4. It guides all of our practices by establishing orthodoxy and orthopraxis.
5. It serves (liturgically) as a transition from statement to action.

Each of these statements bears some necessary explanation but at the same time it is also a snapshot of the Church at various times in its development. So we will start with explanation. The main explanation is that everything is related. There is nothing which does not have bearing on anything else. If God is the God of all then all things are because of God. It is not a fragmented human will that creates but the will of God. Everything comes from God and everything is going back to God. Naturally then, all things are related. So anything which is of God reflects everything else which is of God.

As the narration of our sacred stories, it is our Seder recitation if you will. Just as the Seder is not the Exodus but is the re-membering of that Exodus, the Creed is a bringing forward the Revelation we have been handed. Like the Seder it not only lays out the economy of salvation, it makes the economy of salvation real, here and now. Just as the Old Testament is guided by the events of the Covenant, so the legitimacy and understanding of both the Old and the New Testaments is guided by the Faith which we profess.

When we speak about reality we are speaking about God. All we know God creates – we can only know what God has taught us – through Creation and Revelation. Everything we talk about everything that matters has to do with God. Our Creed focuses us on that fact – we forget and think that what we think about the world is not the Truth nor is it reality. All reality belong to God, not us. So everything we teach and do is in terms of God, not our own thought. The Creed grounds and guides because it only speaks of God and God’s Revelation.

***Creeds in Time***

There have been several creeds used throughout the history of the Church, but the two that people know the best are the “Apostle’s Creed” developed in 2nd century Rome and the Nicene from the 4th century in Constantinople; still the history of even those two creeds is convoluted. [[4]](#footnote-4) The Apostle’s seems to have been constructed in Rome but different places in the West had different forms of the Creed. It really reflects the theological formulations of the first century Roman Church; by 180, Christians had developed an early form of the Creed to refute Gnostic errors. Later versions from the 4th and 5th centuries added statements like “*I believe in the forgiveness of sins*” and the addition of “*holy*” and "*catholic*" to the description of the Church. Specifically in Gaul, the phrase “*he descended to the dead*” came into the creed which is why you do not always see that one. By the eighth century, the creed had attained its present form.

The Nicene Creed has a more direct history, being first promulgated at the Council of Nicaea (325) which was called by Constantine to settle issues which were causing great and therefore political unrest. The Creed though did not appear out of thin air just because Constantine religious called a council. Several other older creeds were considered by the Council Fathers (even an Arian one was presented), but it seems that a creed Eusebius (bishop of Caesarea) submitted (whether he wrote it is doubtful) appears to have formed the basis of the initial creed of the Council. The final version we have was actually compiled over several councils and at least four variations had been set out by local councils by 341. But even that was not the last word. After Constantine's death in 337 his son Constantius II became emperor in the East. Constantius actually had Arian sympathies and set about reversing the Nicene Creed or at least adapting it so that it included Arian statements instead of Anti-Arian ones. He overcame opposition by making an Arian ally bishop of Constantinople. Constantius then used his power to exile bishops adhering to the Nicene Creed. Many lost their lives in exile but some like Athanasius of Alexandria, fled to places like Rome and were given asylum. In 355 Constantius became the emperor in both the East and Western empires and extended his pro-Arian policy toward the western provinces, frequently using force to push through his creed. At least fourteen creeds were developed between 340 and 360 in order to compromise or replace this creed. With his death in 361, forces overcame the opposition and the tables turned on the Arian bishops who themselves were forced out of office or exiled.

In the end, one more council was held in order to put the matter to rest once and for all. For this reason its official names is Nicene-Constantinopolitan for additions made at the Council of Constantinople in 381. It was revisited at the Council of Ephesus (431) but it was finally and formally adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Creeds are the product of development but the core truths they express are set long before pen is put to paper. Because of their origins, the West employs both the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed. Their use is determined liturgically.

**Putting It All Together**

Trying to understand God is hard…well for us anyway. We spend intellectual capital to try and figure it out. Unfortunately we often try to do it from a human foundation. The Creed reminds us of the Truth about the mystery of God, something which is beyond our rational capability to deduce. It helps us explore the nature of God’s actions in the world, heck, in our everyday lives, and it also gives us the means of praising that mystery and those actions. It is the “symbol” of living within God’s economy. The “economy of salvation,” then, is basically “what God is doing” at every moment. It is the understanding within human hindsight/insight of how He is guiding the course of human history towards salvation. When we think of this economy, we can think of it in economic terms, as God's “investment” in His Creation. And just look at what He invests in this Creation: Jesus His Son. That is “what God is doing” every moment of every day.

*“While, however, the Scriptures are from God, the understanding of them belongs to the part of men. Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this, and all make it obvious that they do it by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds and confessions. If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God’s people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.”*

1. **A. Hodge,** *The Confession of Faith*

1. “It’s the economy, stupid!” – ha, ha; I kill myself… [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course that does not apply to the human Jesus – he was definitely male. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And Coca-Cola… [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A third, known as the “Athanasian” (Archbishop of Alexandria – late 3rd early 4th) for its author – though that is unlikely and is more in terms of the attribution like the Apostle’s Creed – is more extensive on the matters of the Trinity and Christ’s nature and not as well known. It mainly concentrates on the Trinitarian issues of its time and place of its development. Its origin and history is also convoluted. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)