

Apostles' Creed

Written by Bhavesh Zaveri

A formula containing in brief statements, or "articles," the fundamental tenets of [Christian belief](#), and having for its authors, according to [tradition](#), the [Twelve Apostles](#).

Throughout the Middle Ages it was generally believed that the Apostles, on the day of Pentecost, while still under the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost, composed our present Creed between them, each of the Apostles contributing one of the twelve articles. This legend dates back to the sixth century (see Pseudo-Augustine in Migne, P.L., XXXIX, 2189, and Pirminius, *ibid.*, LXXXIX, 1034), and it is foreshadowed still earlier in a [sermon](#) attributed to [St. Ambrose](#) ([Migne](#), P.L., XVII, 671; Kattenbusch, I, 81), which takes notice that the [Creed](#) was "pieced together by twelve separate workmen". About the same date (c. 400) [Rufinus](#) ([Migne](#), P.L., XXI, 337) gives a detailed account of the composition of the [Creed](#), which account he professes to have received from earlier ages (*tradunt majores nostri*). Although he does not explicitly assign each article to the authorship of a separate [Apostle](#), he states that it was the joint work of all, and implies that the deliberation took place on the day of Pentecost. Moreover, he declares that "they for many just reasons decided that this [rule of faith](#) should be called the [Symbol](#)", which Greek word he explains to mean both *indicium*, i.e. a token or password by which [Christians](#) might recognize each other, and *collatio*, that is to say an offering made up of separate contributions. A few years before this (c. 390), the letter addressed to [Pope Siricius](#) by the Council of

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[Milan](#)

(

[Migne](#)

, P.L., XVI, 1213) supplies the earliest

[known](#)

instance of the combination

Symbolum Apostolorum

("Creed of the Apostles") in these striking words: "If you credit not the teachings of the

[priests](#)

. . . let credit at least be given to the Symbol of the Apostles which the

[Roman Church](#)

always preserves and maintains inviolate." The word

Symbolum

in this sense, standing alone, meets us first about the middle of the third century in the correspondence of

[St. Cyprian](#)

and

[St. Firmilia](#)

, the latter in particular speaking of the

[Creed](#)

as the "Symbol of the Trinity", and recognizing it as an integral part of the

[rite](#)

of

[baptism](#)

(

[Migne](#)

, P.L., III, 1165, 1143). It should be added, moreover, that Kattenbusch (II, p. 80, note)

[believes](#)

that the same use of the words can be traced as far back as

[Tertullian](#)

. Still, in the first two centuries after Christ, though we often find mention of the

[Creed](#)

under other designations (e.g.

regula fidei, doctrina, traditio

), the name

symbolum

does not occur.

[Rufinus](#)

was therefore wrong when he declared that the

[Apostles](#)

themselves had "for many just reasons" selected this very term. This fact, joined with the intrinsic improbability of the story, and the surprising silence of the

[New Testament](#)

and of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, leaves us no choice but to regard the circumstantial narrative of

[Rufinus](#)

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as unhistorical.

Among recent critics, some have assigned to the [Creed](#) an origin much later than the [Apostolic](#) Age. Harnack, e.g., asserts that in its present form it represents only the [baptismal](#) confession of the [Church](#) of Southern Gaul, [dating](#) at earliest from the second half of the fifth century (Das apostolische Glaubensbekenntniss, 1892, p. 3). Strictly construed, the terms of this statement are accurate enough; though it seems probable that it was not in [Gaul](#), but in [Rome](#), that the [Creed](#) really assumed its final shape (see Burn in the "Journal of Theol. Studies", July, 1902). But the stress laid by Harnack on the lateness of our received text (T) is, to say the least, somewhat misleading. It is [certain](#), as Harnack allows, that another and older form of the [Creed](#) (R) had come into existence, in [Rome](#) itself, before the middle of the second century. Moreover, as we shall see, the differences between R and T are not very important and it is also probable that R, if not itself drawn up by the [Apostles](#), is at least based upon an outline which dates back to the [Apostolic](#) age. Thus, taking the document as a whole, we may say confidently, in the words of a modern [Protestant](#) authority, that "in and with our [Creed](#) we confess that which since the days of the [Apostles](#) has been the [faith](#) of united [Christendom](#)" (Zahn, Apostles' Creed, tr., p, 222). The question of the

apostolicity

of the

Creed

ought not to be dismissed without due attention being paid to the following five considerations:

(1) There are very suggestive traces in the New Testament of the recognition of a certain "form of doctrine" (*typos* didaches), Romans 6:17, which moulded, as it were, the faith of new converts to Christ's law, and which involved not only the word of faith believed in the heart, but "with the mouth confession made unto salvation" (Romans 10:8-10).

(2) In close connection with this we must recall the profession of faith in Jesus Christ exacted of the eunuch (Acts 8:37) as a preliminary to baptism (Augustine, "De Fide et Operibus", cap. ix; Migne, P.L., LVII, 205) and the formula of baptism itself in the name of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity (Matthew 28:19); and cf. the Didache 7:2, and

[9:5](#)

). Moreover, as soon as we begin to obtain any sort of detailed description of the [ceremonial](#) of [baptism](#) we find that, as a preliminary to the actual immersion, a profession of [faith](#) was exacted of the [convert](#), which exhibits from the earliest times a clearly divided and separate confession of Father, Son, and [Holy Ghost](#), corresponding to the Divine Persons invoked in the formula of [baptism](#). As we do not find in any earlier document the full form of the profession of [faith](#), we cannot be sure that it is identical with our [Creed](#), but, on the other hand, it is [certain](#) that nothing has yet been discovered which is inconsistent with such a supposition. See, for example, the "Canons of Hippolytus" (c. 220) or the "Didascalia" (c. 250) in Hahn's "Bibliothek der Symbole" (8, 14, 35); together with the slighter allusions in [Justin Martyr](#) and [Cyprian](#).

(2) Whatever difficulties may be raised regarding the [existence](#) of the [Disciplina Arcani](#) in early times (Kattenbusch, II, 97 sqq.), there can be no question that in [Cyril of Jerusalem](#), Hilary, Augustine, Leo, the Gelasian Sacramentary, and many other sources of the fourth and fifth centuries the [idea](#) is greatly insisted upon; that according to ancient [tradition](#) the [Creed](#) was to be learned by heart, and never to be consigned to writing. This undoubtedly provides a plausible explanation of the fact that in the case of no [primitive creed](#) is the text preserved to us complete or in a continuous form. What we know of these formulae in their earliest state is derived from what we can piece together from the quotations, more or less scattered, which are found in such writers, for example, as

[Irenaeus](#)

and

[Tertullian](#)

.

(3) Though no uniform type of [Creed](#) can be surely recognized among the earlier [Eastern](#) writers before the [Council of Nicaea](#), an argument which has been considered by many to disprove the [existence](#) of any [Apostolic](#) formula, it is a striking fact that the [Eastern Churches](#) in the fourth century are found in possession of a [Creed](#) which reproduces with variations the old Roman type. This fact is full admitted by such [Protestant](#) authorities as Harnack (in Hauck's Realencyclopädie, I, 747) and Kattenbusch (I, 380 sq.; II, 194 sqq., and 737 sq.). It is obvious that these data would harmonize very well with the theory that a primitive [Creed](#) had been delivered to the [Christian](#) community of [Rome](#), either by Sts. Peter and Paul themselves or by their immediate [successors](#), and in the course of [time](#) had spread throughout the world.

(4) Furthermore note that towards the end of the second century we can extract from the writings of [St. Irenæus](#) in southern Gaul and of [Tertullian](#) in far-off [Africa](#) two almost complete [Creed](#) [s](#) agreeing closely both with the old Roman [Creed](#) (R), as we [know](#) it from [Rufinus](#)

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, and with one another. It will be useful to translate from Burn (Introduction to the Creeds, pp. 50, 51) his tabular presentation of the evidence in the case of

[Tertullian](#)

. (Cf. MacDonald in "Ecclesiastical Review", February, 1903):