

The Apostles' Creed Among Chinese
by Stephen P. Oliver

What influence will the Apostles' Creed have among Chinese? This article will consider this question in light of what Chinese Christians can learn from some of major theological challenges faced by Western Christians.

The Apostles' Creed expresses the core of the Christian faith:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into the heavens. He is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and the life everlasting. Amen.¹

The heart of Christianity is the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Apostles' Creed is a summary of key biblical truths about the Triune God. Further, Christ receives the longest explanation. It is not surprising that Christianity (with the word, "Christ", in it) should emphasize Christ. The Father is the father of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit witnesses to Christ. The high point of God's work is the redemption that was accomplished on the cross. While the work of the Father and Holy Spirit are spoken of in large and broad manner, the work of Christ in regard to redemption is spoken of in a very particular manner. The cross is a particular instrument and other particular individuals (Mary and Pilate) are mentioned, fixing His death and resurrection in a particular space and time. Thus, the Apostles' Creed conveys important broad and universal truths about the Triune God (Almighty, Creator, Judge, Forgiveness). The creed also conveys particular truths located within an identifiable time in history (Jesus' birth, death on the cross and resurrection).

This core of the Christian faith has served to teach, edify and reaffirm the Christian belief about God and what He has done for us. It has also served as a basis for discernment to identify those teachings or emphases which stray from Christianity and cannot be rightly called Christian. It has helped people to be faithful to Christ and His Gospel. This faithfulness also means receiving and giving to others the fullness of the blessings of Christ and His Gospel. Will Chinese Christians fare better than Western Christians in such faithfulness?

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 21-22.

Let us first look at the background in which the Apostles' Creed was composed. Regarding the background of the Apostles' Creed, Justo Gonzales writes: "Its basic text was put together, probably in Rome, around the year 150. It was then called 'symbol of the faith.' The word 'symbol' in this context did not have the meaning that it has for us today; rather, it meant a means of recognition, such as a token that a general gave to a messenger, so that the recipient could recognize a true messenger. Likewise, the 'symbol' put together in Rome was a means whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies circulating at the time, particularly gnosticism and Marcionism. Any who could affirm this creed were neither Gnostics nor Marcionites."²

Gnosticism was a large and multifaceted movement which was largely a result of the major cultural thought of the Western world: Greek Philosophy (especially Plato). Gnosticism existed outside of Christianity, but when it entered the church, some of its key beliefs came into sharp conflict with Biblical teaching. The conflict dealt with by the creed can be summed up in the Gnostic belief that matter is evil, including human flesh. Christian Gnosticism denied that Jesus had a body like ours (i.e. He only "seemed" to have a body like ours). In contrast, the creed affirms the teaching of Biblical revelation that God created heaven and earth (matter), Jesus was born of a woman, was crucified, died and rose again, and there will be a resurrection of the flesh.

Marcionism was a religious movement started in Rome after Marcion moved there in A.D. 144. Marcion grew up in a Christian home, but developed anti-Jewish and anti-material attitudes. He rejected the Old Testament, purged the New Testament of its Jewishness and taught that Jesus was not born of a Jewish woman but rather appeared as a man and would not judge since all would finally be accepted. In contrast, the creed concisely emphasized the Biblical teaching that Jesus was born of Mary and that He would return to judge.

It is worth noting here that approximately two hundred years later, the Nicene Creed was written to uphold faithfulness to Biblical revelation in light of another powerful flow of thought from the large Western cultural arena of Greek philosophy. In the year 325, approximately 300 bishops gathered in Nicea for the First Ecumenical Council. Their struggle with Arianism resulted in the Nicene Creed. Arianism held to a viewpoint of God that was in agreement with Plato's thoughts regarding a supreme being. To a large degree, the idea that Christians believed in the supreme being of the revered philosophers had been very fruitful in bringing many into the church and raising the status of Christianity in the whole society. However, the problem Arianism revealed surfaced in regard to Christ Jesus. In order to maintain Plato's supreme being's integrity, Arius said Christ Jesus was created. The Nicene Creed expresses the Biblical faith that Christ Jesus was not created, but is co-eternal and equal in divinity to God the Father.

A century later, the influence of another giant of Western culture was being appreciated and felt in the church. There is a sense in which we can say that Aristotle was almost as much responsible for the Reformation as was Luther. Aristotle was rediscovered and

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 63.

people like Thomas Aquinas were deeply satisfied to find that such pillars of the large and ancient cultural world in which they lived were in such agreement on many points with the Bible. Aristotle's fascinating and mature moral philosophy was accepted into church doctrine to the degree that Christ Jesus and His work were overshadowed. The Reformation return to the priority of the Biblical revelation of Christ became the corrective measure.

The struggle continued through the Enlightenment to the point where recently Alasdair MacIntyre was able to show that Aristotle is healthier than Nietzsche.³ It continues today with postmodern thought. How can Christians value the good in the cultural worlds to which they belong while being faithful to the special revelation of Christ and the Bible so that they are able to make and affirm the most critical discernments. The Apostles' Creed stands as a monument to such discernment. For all the failings of Western Christians, the challenges they experienced impelled them to produce some long-lasting gems that express faithfulness to the core of Christianity, not least of which is the Apostles' Creed.

What will be the fruit of the Chinese Christian world? We can rejoice in Alasdair MacIntyre's recognition that Aristotle is healthier than Nietzsche, and consequently understand the Aquinas' affinity for Aristotle. In like manner, we can rejoice in the Chinese philosopher Zhuxi's recognition that Confucius is healthier than many other major voices in the large world of Chinese culture. Confucius is like Aristotle in that he is healthier than Nietzsche, emotivism and all the other weaknesses MacIntyre reveals in modern Western thought. Yes, Confucius is to be admired.

Matteo Ricci knew this: "Ricci became the first missionary in China to believe (or discover) that the idea of God was evident in the Confucian classics."⁴ In the Confucian classics, Ricci also "ascribed ethical ideas compatible with Christianity."⁵ This sounds familiar: the movements of thought that formed the background for the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed and Reformation were similar. Peter K. H. Lee writes: "Characteristically, most of the Chinese Christian thinkers and writers have identified Confucianism as the mainstream of Chinese thought. Indeed most scholarly-minded Chinese Christians acknowledge their indebtedness to Confucianism. Seldom do you find a Chinese Christian who repudiates Confucianism wholesale. Not to speak of repudiation, criticism of Confucianism is uncommon among Chinese Christians. This may be symptomatic of superficial understanding of Confucianism, however."⁶ Does this remind us of the Aquinas love for Aristotle which lead to overshadowing Christ? Lee's last sentence does, however, contain some hope. Discernment and faithfulness are needed. The Apostle's Creed stands as a monumental example for all of us.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 259.

⁴ John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity; The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ Peter K. H. Lee, ed., *Confucianism-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 16.