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## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE CREEDS?

In my part of the world — south-central Ontario — there's a lively Internet discussion these days about the propriety and place of a Creed in worship. More specifically, there's an animated debate about those permissive rubrics: "The ...Creed may be spoken..." Why not "...*shall* be spoken..." ? That's the way it used to be in the *Service Book and Hymnal (SBH)*, as we old-timers remember.

But both *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and its predecessor and progenitor the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* have changed a directive rubric to a permissive one. Now why? I interrupt my series on a *Customary for Worship* to take up this question.

1) First some history:

The old godfather of English language Lutheran liturgy, Luther Dotterer Reed (see below) maintains, in his magisterial *The Lutheran Liturgy* (1946, Muhlenberg Press, page 302) that "the Creed is not found in the earliest known liturgies..." and that "its later insertion may be ascribed to the appreciation for precise doctrinal statement characteristic of the Western Church."

One of Reed's successors in our own day, Philip Pfatteicher, argues in his *Commentary of the Lutheran Book of Worship* (1990, Augsburg Fortress, page 145) that "the principal creedal declaration in the liturgy is the eucharistic prayer..." See *ELWorship*, page 103 ff., and the "Thanksgivings at the Table", page 65 ff.

Reed makes an attractive contention: "...the two Creeds correspond to the two sacraments...", since subsequent history has associated the Nicene Creed with Holy Communion, the Apostles' Creed with Baptism.

Acknowledging these associations, framers of the *LBW* gave precedence to the Nicene

Creed at Eucharist on festive and penitential Sundays (that is, in the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter), and — "so as not to lose congregational familiarity with the Apostle's Creed", the Creed of Baptism — allowed the use of the Apostles' Creed on "green" Sundays.

No Creed at all is necessary on weekdays. And the Athanasian Creed has a history of use on Trinity Sunday.

2) So where do we stand? I stand with those who want to retain the Creeds — all three — among our symbols, since they tie us to other Christians. Like them or not, they're part of an ecumenical treasury I'd hesitate to jettison. Christian unity all but demands some kind of catholic subscription to ancient Trinitarian symbols.

3) But, as with our other Lutheran Confessional symbols in the *Book of Concord* — and like the Bible itself! — we don't have to be literalists or fundamentalists with any of them. It behooves us, that is, to treat the Creeds with the same historical-critical tools of modern scholarship that we use with the Bible. Like the Bible, the Creeds need loving pastoral interpretation.

4) And all three Creeds present monumental problems in interpretation to modern people. Hence, if you intend to use a Creed *at all* in worship, you have to preach and teach on them frequently to unpack a meaning intelligible to modern people.

I for one do not miss the Athanasian Creed one bit in *ELWorship*. I'd never use it in worship. Those *anathemas* in the Athanasian Creed are really more than I can bring myself to contemplate, much less to profess, to put it kindly.

5) And I'll stick with those who say any Creed used *in worship* — even a modern one such as UCC types often prefer — sounds too much like a Loyalty Oath. As a friend puts it, it's almost as if you're invited to stand at attention and place your right hand over your heart. First time visitors can find any Creed awfully off-putting. In the words of a beloved teacher, to use a Creed in Christian worship is to introduce a moment of *pedagogy* (teaching) into what should be pure *doxology* (praise). So my advice: Save the Creeds, all three of them, as a general rule, for an educational setting, like an Adult Forum.

And remember Pfatteicher: The Eucharistic Prayer ("Thanksgiving at the Table") is the principal creedal declaration in Holy Communion. Thoroughly Trinitarian, when properly composed. See [Essay 104](#) above.

6) But if you'd miss a Creed in worship, I'd prefer to be able to *sing* it. U.S. Episcopal Bishop James Pike used to say he could sing a lot of stuff he'd be uncomfortable saying. To sing any text turns it into poetry, into a hymn. Marcus Borg, in a "conversation" with N.T. Wright, made a similar claim in their recent *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (1999, Harper Collins, p. 155). Borg is reflecting on the Creed and

the Trinity and concludes as follows:

When I say the creed, I understand myself to be identifying with the community that says these words together. For those of us in creedal churches, doing so is part of our identity. Moreover, I identify not only with the community in the present, but also with generations of long-dead Christians who said these same ancient words as they stood in the presence of sacred mystery. I experience a momentary participation in the communion of saints. Given all of the above, I think we would understand the purpose of the creed better if we sang it or chanted it.

In any event, see the companion piece to this essay: a [sung Nicene Creed!](#)

7) How about this then as a rule of thumb: Use a Creed in worship only seasonally. Maybe during Advent and Lent. And always sung (see attached). But not during green seasons (after Epiphany and after Pentecost). White seasons (Christmas and Easter) pose a problem: Maybe then the Thanksgiving for Baptism. Or a sung Creed with trumpets and tympani!

8) Bottom Line: I remind you that the use of a Creed in worship — and of a Confession: See my next essay, [Essay 139](#). — are *pastoral* questions. Your own distinctive parish realities and mission imperatives should be honoured and respected. A missional emphasis on welcoming the stranger might take you in a different direction from, say, nurturing the faithful in a community with little potential for interaction with the wider community.

An aside: Luther Reed, cited above, was my mother's father's good friend. My grandfather, Elmer F. Krauss, taught Greek and New Testament and Liturgy at Chicago Lutheran Seminary in Maywood, Illinois. When I entered the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Luther Reed was living on campus, already an old man; his friend, my grandfather, had long since died.

Luther Reed remembered me from visits to Maywood in my childhood, and asked a favour of me. Reed had been one of the fathers of the *SBH*, and he held the archives of the committees that formed that book — the first in North America to feature a full Eucharistic Prayer. Knowing my interest in the arts, he asked if I would consent to illuminate the title pages of the various sections of those archives.

I happily consented, and as a thank-you gift, Reed presented me with a copy of his *Choral Service Book, "...Authentic Plain Song Intonations and Responses for the... Common Service for the use of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations with Accompanying Harmonies for Organ..."* Although Reed was text editor, Harry Archer, organist at First Church, Pittsburgh,

PA, provided (chiefly "plain song") music. Including Creed.

Reed's gift to me provoked an inspiration in my campus ministry days at Syracuse University. I had heard of a simple setting of the Nicene Creed sung to a monotone by the people, while organ or keyboard describes the action in an underlying succession of shifting chords. The effect was all very C of E.

I recruited a young member of my campus flock, Gale Kramer, a student in the splendid Church Music Programme at SU in those days, and he provided a keyboard setting for my idea. Years later, Gary Radke, another student member of my flock, adapted Gale's music to the new translations of the Creed by the English Language Liturgical Consultation. And good friend Peter Nikiforuk, church musician at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario, graciously rendered my hand-copied score as a PDF file with his magic music software. I reproduce their work in an accompanying document, here: [sung Nicene Creed](#). Many thanks to you all, Gale, Gary and Peter!

The congregation sings the Creed on a single note, the monotone G cited in the score, in the natural cadences of English speech, while the organ or keyboard provides commentary on the meaning of the texts in a series of shifting sonorities. I think it's quite lovely. With trumpets and tympani, positively hair-raising!

Oh, yes: I'm certain you can find a musically gifted friend who can adapt what's printed in my version to the texts of the Apostles' Creed as well. (You provide it... I'll post it!)

Next time: Confession and Forgiveness in Worship.



Here's another link to the [sung Nicene Creed](#)!