

Session three – Part of the one great Church, with a particular story of our own

Sometimes people have described us as a ‘non-credal’ church, believing that we rarely, if ever, say creeds in our worship and that we want to give individuals freedom to state the faith in their own words. However, it’s not quite as simple as that! It is true that the saying of creeds has not generally played a regular part in worship at most of our churches and it is true that we have placed a high value on freedom of conscience, but it is not true that we have no sense of the faith we can hold together or that ‘you can believe what you like in the URC’.

The Statement offers thanksgiving for the witness to the faith given by the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. (Note that ‘catholic faith’ here refers to the faith of the whole Church – and does not mean the same as Roman Catholic). These two creeds, both from the early centuries of the Church’s life, are important to us because of their great age, because they are honoured by churches throughout the world and through many centuries, and because they were framed at critical times when the Christian faith was being shaped. You can find them both in *Rejoice and Sing* and there are fascinating stories to tell about them. We often think of attention to the Virgin Mary as a rather late development in the Church’s life, so it’s fascinating to notice that she is named in the (comparatively brief) Apostles’ Creed! And it’s worth finding out the long story behind the brackets around one phrase in the Nicene Creed! We give thanks to God for these two creeds, not because they are exactly the words we would want to use today, but because they represent early attempts by the whole Church, meeting together, to say what the Christian faith is really about. From our own times, when Christians often find it hard to agree or to make joint statements, their achievement in framing these creeds seems a cause of thankfulness and even amazement. These creeds have some power and resonance, and as we write contemporary creeds and affirmations for today, or as we write hymns or offer prayers, it’s worth asking how far what we say is ‘in continuity’ with this particular honoured past.

It’s true that creeds in the early Church were often formed as part of a war against ‘untruth’, in battles we would not want to fight in the same ways. However they provide good testing grounds for our own attempts to speak the faith for today.

The Statement also acknowledges declarations of faith made by our particular forebears and give thanks for them. We recognise what they were trying to do in their own time in terms of re-describing the faith and remaking the church – and we honour them. But we do not believe that we honour them only by repeating their words exactly, but rather by doing in our time what they were trying to do in theirs; to be faithful to the Apostolic faith and making it clear for today. You can read about the history of these three traditions (in an excellent leaflet written by David Thompson, entitled *Where do we come from?: The origins of the United Reformed Church*).

The congregational response to this part of the Statement affirms that we believe that our faith comes from the same source as the early Church and as our historical forebears, but we also believe that faith has to be renewed for every generation. This is something that really does stand out about the United Reformed Church. We are ceaselessly working and praying to find ways of living and speaking our faith that will resonate with the times. Faith is not to be lived in a museum, but is for life today. Some would criticise us for this or at least warn us of the dangers. We could become so identified with our present culture that we do not recognise how Christ speaks to it to challenge and renew it. If we sit too light to the history of the Church we might miss out on a great wealth of wisdom and spiritual depth. Perhaps we make the mistake of thinking we have to ‘start again’ in every generation and we forget that we are not on our own in being Christians, that countless generations have gone before us and can offer us the witness of their faith. However, there are also plenty of voices who will cry that the Church is too often stuck in the past and that the world needs brave Christians who have the courage to let the Holy Spirit renew them in faith for their own times.

Questions for discussion

- Do you think that the Church is either too tied to the past or too swayed by present trends?
- What would a local congregation look like if it had the balance about right?
- Look at the Apostles’ Creed and have a go at editing it to produce a ‘creed for the 21st century’. What factors would you take into account as you did it?
- Have a go at writing a new statement of faith from scratch. (Please send your final text to the Doctrine, Prayer and Worship committee!)
- Can you imagine other ways of ‘stating the faith’ than by writing or saying a creed?
- How does your local congregation express its faith?