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WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTIANITY?

CONRAD H. MOEHLMANN
Rochester Theological Seminary, Rochester, N.Y.

ABSTRACT

In view of the current demand of an organized group in Christianity that a definite list of "fundamentals" be insisted upon, it is imperative to discover what such a list would be if based on actual history. A survey of twenty Christian groups is made, showing in brief compass what each regards as essential. Considerable diversity exists in these statements. The Apostles' Creed, as the most universally accepted formula, is critically examined. It is found that several items in this creed are susceptible of varied interpretation. The conclusion is that no formulation adequately interprets the whole of Christianity. The attempt to require acceptance of a fixed creed leads to unfortunate results for religion.

Of late there has been considerable interest in "fundamentals." Conferences on fundamentals have been widely convened. Questionnaires on fundamentals have been sent to thousands. The "fundamentals" of Christianity have been summarized in a few points. Superficial and easy conclusions have been reached. The general impression has been that the essence of Christianity is exceedingly easy to discover. New Testament scholarship has not reached a unanimous verdict on the teaching of Jesus; the historians of Christianity cannot fully explain the transition from primitive Christianity to nascent Catholicism or state in a few sentences the significance of the history of Christianity; the last book on Paul has by no means been written; the last primitive Christian document of the second century has not been found, to say nothing of being interpreted; the complicated history of medieval Christianity and the total importance of Protestantism have not been evaluated—but all this does not prevent some twentieth-century Christians from concluding that the final revelation has been granted unto them.

History's verdict on what is fundamental may not be overlooked. A cross-section of a few of the numerous Christian

interpretations of what is essential in Christianity should convince the unprejudiced of the great variety of thought and practice in Christianity, and enable valid conclusions on the value of creeds to be drawn.

I. SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALS

In the United States alone there are some two hundred Christian groups. Each of these maintains some peculiar attitude in faith or in practice. The following survey must be restricted to an examination of the fundamentals of merely a score of Christian groups. But the tenets of both principal and minor bodies of Christians will be considered. Hence the investigation should prove fair and sufficient. Indeed, to prolong the study would be to accentuate the variations in Christian beliefs.

1. The Orthodox Greek church accepts the interpretation of Christianity contained in the findings of the councils of Nicaea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople (553), Constantinople (680), Constantinople (691), Nicaea (787), Constantinople (879), etc.

2. Roman Catholicism in addition to approving of the ecumenical creeds has as its basis the conclusions of the Council of Trent, those of the Vatican Council, and the papal decisions. And Roman Catholicism added the little word *filioque* to the Nicene Creed. This addition is one of the reasons for the separation of the Greek church from the Latin church. *Filioque* does not appear until the late sixth century and in the early part of the ninth century had not been inserted in the creed. Its gradual adoption by the Latin church caused its transmission to Protestantism.

3. The basis of Lutheranism is the Bible as interpreted by the Formula of Concord, 1580, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology for the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Larger Catechism, and the Smaller Catechism.

4. Calvinism came to be summarized in five points: particular, or absolute predestination; limited atonement; natural inability or total depravity; irresistible or efficacious grace; perseverance of the saints.

5. Arminianism could counter with: conditional predestination; universal atonement; saving faith; resistible grace; uncertainty of perseverance.

6. Anabaptism was a radical type of Protestantism with an emphasis upon the freedom of the will, the illumination of the Spirit, the private interpretation of the Scriptures. Anabaptists insisted that the New Testament is superior to the Old Testament, that the church should be composed of believers, that the ordinances do not have sacramental significance, that the church should separate from the state, that religious liberty is the right of every man, that war is anti-Christian, that voluntary communism is required by the New Testament, and that the paying of interest is contrary to the Bible. Anabaptism was condemned by Catholic and Protestant alike.

7. The Six Principle Baptists employed Hebrews 6:1, 2 as their point of departure and insisted upon: repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment.

8. The Primitive Baptists are remarkable for their hyper-Calvinism, premillennialism, complete literalism, and for their opposition to missions, Sunday-schools, secret societies, and the use of musical instruments in connection with worship.

9. The Conservative Dunkers are orthodox trinitarians who demand trine forward immersion, confirmation while kneeling in the water of baptism, the evening eucharist, feet-washing, the love feast, the veiling of women, anointing with oil, non-resistance, total abstinence, abstinence from oaths, plain attire, and omission of wearing of jewelry.

10. The Old Order of Amish Mennonites believe, among other things, in the strict ban (no social contact with the

excommunicated), washing of feet, marriage between members only, pouring, the celebration of the Lord's Supper twice a year, use of hooks and eyes instead of buttons, worship in private houses, autonomy of the local church. They allow no evening or protracted meetings, no church conferences, and no benevolent institutions. They do not associate with other Christian groups.

11. The Free Methodist church in addition to supporting the Articles of Faith of the Methodist Episcopal church emphasizes entire sanctification, a more rigid eschatology; they have general superintendents, and permit laymen in equal numbers and on the same basis as ministers in district, annual, and general conferences.

12. The Cumberland Presbyterian church has adopted a revised Westminster Confession, is against the doctrine of reprobation, is non-liturgical, and requires no subscription to a confession for church membership.

13. The Reformed church of America regards Christianity as defined in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism.

14. The Protestant Episcopal church in America uses as its basis the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the revised Thirty-nine Articles.

15. The Hicksite Friends rely on the "Light Within" and leave special doctrines and dogmas to the decisions of each individual.

16. The Polish National Catholic church of America uses the Bible and the findings of the first four ecumenical councils as basic, rejects papal infallibility and eternal punishment, regards faith as merely helpful and the hearing of the word of God in the Polish National Catholic church as a sacrament, and approves private interpretation of the Bible.

17. The Church Transcendent affirms that God is one, that humanity is God's family, that human rights are superior to

property rights, that mind is superior to matter, that there should be one true international, interracial religion. It has a fourfold kind of membership: hereditary, adolescent, plenary, celestial.

18. The Amana Society believes in the Bible, *a new revelation to them*, a fire and spirit baptism only, confirmation at the age of fifteen, a biennial celebration of the eucharist, plain dress, omission of amusements and oaths, non-resistance, and communism.

19. The Pentecostal Holiness church holds to modern Arminianism, joyous demonstration in worship, premillennialism, divine healing, perfectionism, and the real baptism of the Holy Spirit.

20. The General Convention of the New Jerusalem believes in one God, in a trinity of essence, a Bible plenary dictated by the Lord Himself, the literal sense of the Bible, the deeper sense of the Bible, that the one God by a virgin birth lived a human life overcoming sin, that all the enemies of the human race are in subjection in every man who co-operates with God, that man is raised up in his body in the spiritual world, that the judgment occurs immediately after death in the world of spirits and is man's coming to a real knowledge of himself.

This survey demonstrates that Christianity has never been in agreement regarding what is fundamental. Similarly, the documents of the primitive church reveal a refreshing variety of opinion. The Christology of Mark is not that of Paul or of John. The Orthodox Greek church differs from the Roman Catholic church in several dogmas. The Lutheran basis cannot be equated with either Calvinism or Arminianism, and Anabaptism was so radical as to be repudiated and caricatured by most Protestant bodies to say nothing of Roman Catholicism. Every variety of faith and practice has adherents and regards itself as 100 per cent orthodox. Laying on of hands, feet-washing, plain attire, premillennialism, omission of wearing of jewelry, wearing of hooks and eyes instead of buttons,

veiling of women, confirmation at the age of fifteen, the biennial celebration of the eucharist, are regarded as quite as important as the Nicene Creed, the Westminster Confession, the Augsburg Confession, the Thirty-nine Articles. Indeed, the matter of the hooks and eyes may be far more divisive than the matter of the Smalcald Articles. What the past has fought for in the matter of religion is sometimes incomprehensible, to the third and fourth generations.

II. AN EXAMINATION OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

Many groups of Christians accept the Apostles' Creed as basis. But the "received" form of this summary is not at all identical with the Roman form or with the much earlier forms. On the basis of Schaff's¹ brilliant study and employing the "received" text of the Western form, we shall indicate by numerals the approximate date of the *first appearance* of each affirmation.

1. I believe in God (prior to A.D. 250 "in one God") the Father (A.D. 250) Almighty (A.D. 200) maker of heaven and earth (A.D. 650),

2. and in Jesus Christ (A.D. 300) his (A.D. 220) only (A.D. 390) begotten (A.D. 341) Son (A.D. 220) our Lord (A.D. 260),

3. who (A.D. 390) was conceived (A.D. 550) by the Holy (A.D. 390) Ghost (A.D. 220), born (A.D. 220) of the virgin Mary (A.D. 220),

4. suffered (A.D. 220) under Pontius Pilate (A.D. 200), was crucified (A.D. 220), dead (A.D. 220) and buried (A.D. 220);

5. he descended into hell (A.D. 390), the third day (A.D. 220) he rose (A.D. 390) from the dead (A.D. 220),

6. he ascended into heaven (A.D. 390) and sitteth at the right hand (A.D. 220) of God (A.D. 550) the Father (A.D. 220) Almighty (A.D. 550),

7. from thence (A.D. 390) he shall come to judge the quick and the dead (A.D. 220).

¹ *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, pp. 52-55.

8. I believe in (A.D. 250) the Holy Ghost (A.D. 220),
9. the holy Catholic (A.D. 450) Church (A.D. 250), the communion of saints (A.D. 550),
10. the forgiveness of sins (A.D. 250),
11. the resurrection (A.D. 220) of the body (A.D. 1543),
12. and the life everlasting (A.D. 250).

The conclusion of such a conservative authority as Schaff is worth quoting:

If we regard, then, the present text of the Apostles' Creed as a complete whole, we can hardly trace it beyond the sixth, certainly not beyond the close of the fifth century, and its triumph over all the other forms in the Latin church was not completed till the eighth century.

Even the Apostles' Creed was an exceedingly gradual development and required centuries to attain its present form. How a *text* not affirmed by the early church can be made obligatory for twentieth-century democratic Christians is a little difficult to understand.

But not only does the text of creeds vary from generation to generation, but the interpretation of its clauses undergoes change. To begin with, consider the Apostles' Creed. After we confess this symbol, we ask ourselves what is meant. For example, consider the affirmation, "He descended into hell." One may read "hell," "Hades," "inhabitants of the spirit world." Moreover, we recall that the Roman creed did not contain this clause until after the fifth century. Finally, the investigator is confronted with the difficulty of interpreting the expression. It has been regarded as identical with "buried," as denoting the "intensity of Christ's suffering on the cross," and as an actual descent of the slain Jesus to the realm of the dead. What is "the communion of the saints"? What is denoted by "the resurrection of the body"? Did the church appreciate Paul's *soma pneumatikon*? If so, the modern Christian were fortunate. Alas! one recalls that "body" first appeared in this creed in A.D. 1543, that "flesh" appeared in A.D. 220. The work must be done over again. This clause

must be connected with the gnostic controversy whose history is in our day being rewritten.

The fourth-century church debated for more than half a century on *homoousios* of the Nicene Creed only to discover that its earlier significance had been modified.

The symbol of Chalcedon was a compromise formula. Actually little progress had been made since A.D. 381. It can be understood only after several thoroughgoing courses upon it. "Born of the virgin Mary the mother of God; to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably." The once underlined was directed against Nestorius; the twice underlined against the Eutychians. Immediately we wish to know who these brethren were and what they desired to affirm and why their views could not be adopted by the church. This symbol had hardly been spread on the minutes, when the monophysites made a frontal attack. The sixth century beheld the disintegration of the imperial church. The Eastern provincial churches separated from it. In succession, the Persian church, the Jacobites of Syria, the Copts of Egypt, the Ethiopian church, and the Armenian church departed from the orthodox fold. Christianity dissipated its vitality in doctrinal controversy and had no superior religion to offer to advancing Mohammedanism. In fact, during the succeeding thirteen centuries it has not been able to conquer Islam. Sometimes history exacts a heavy penalty for failure to understand the nature of Christianity.

If the Christian church has never agreed regarding the interpretation of such a simple and ancient formula as the Apostles' Creed, is it conceivable that a small group of twentieth-century Christians will be able to formulate the fundamentals of Christianity for their brethren?

Consider the Apostles' Creed from another angle, from the point of view of completeness. What information does it give us regarding the attitude Christianity should take on

disarmament, on internationalism, on the recently adopted amendments to the Constitution of the United States, on the general labor unrest? Does it at all evaluate the Sermon on the Mount or enable us to understand the principal purpose of Jesus? We must still face the problems of today ten minutes after pledging allegiance to the Apostles' Creed. The following excerpt from an editorial in a Catholic weekly should bring conviction:

It has become plain that we can go little farther along present lines of attempting to patch up modern industrial society by legislative plasters. In laying down the first step in a real program of reform we must proceed on the assumption that our objectives are clear: Capitalism must go, the modern State must go, and in their places must arise a society based on the mediaeval Guild State.

What, then, is the first step? Existing Catholic societies and agencies must merge their efforts and undertake to educate Catholic workingmen in the new economics. We will set down this one piece of educational reform and place it alongside the entire list of any existing reconstruction program as an equivalent. Indeed we will go so far as to say that we pin our hopes solely to the education of our people, and primarily of our Catholic workingmen, in the ancient Catholic principles and methods of social ethics.

The tragic element about the fundamentalist controversy is its diversion of Christianity's attention from the realities of the present day. It is far more essential to the survival of Christianity that the church provide a proper background and atmosphere for twentieth-century civilization than that it seek to awaken interest in its ancient doctrinal fossils.

No confession of faith has ever been composed that adequately described the faith of its subscribers.

Probably the greatest fallacy of fashioners of creeds is the assumption that subscription accomplishes something. As soon as the Nicene Creed had been signed, the battle began. Had they signed *homoousios* or *homoiousios*? The tyro in church history is familiar with the general bedlam that continued for decades. Just how many times was Athanasius banished and what atrocities were not alleged against him! How many parties and minor groups came into existence

between A.D. 325-381! But the test case must be the Apostles' Creed and the witness a conservative historian:

It is a singular fact that in the non-episcopal churches of Great Britain and the United States, the Apostles' Creed is practically far less used but much more generally believed than in some State Churches where it is part of the regular worship, like the Lord's Prayer.

The Constitution of the United States did more for religion by its assertion of the principle of the separation of church and state than the constitutions of Europe that made religion obligatory.

Our study of the Apostles' Creed has shown that the simplest and most ancient of the church's symbols has undergone many textual modifications and transformations, that its interpretation has varied, that it does not at all summarize the faith of the primitive church, that it has not secured uniformity of belief, that its recitation by no means guarantees the acceptance of its contents, that concentration of attention on doctrine causes Christianity to lose contact with life. The same conclusions would need to be reached regarding any confession of faith. The Nicene Creed, for example, exists in three forms: the original form, the form as now received by the Eastern church, and the Latin or Western form. The *filioque* of the Latin form first appeared in A.D. 589 and is one of the reasons for the cleavage between the Greek and the Roman churches.

III. SOME CONCLUSIONS

The adoption of summaries of faith has been preceded by, accompanied by, and followed by tragic controversy. They have not fairly described the genius of any group. They have often damaged the influence of Christianity; contradicting faith and love; neglecting the "whom" in the emphasis upon the "what," destroying the freedom which is in Christ; utterly forgetting "for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision; but faith manifesting itself in love"; reducing Christianity to a new legalism

when it must remain an experience. They make the test of Christianity intellectual. They tend to exalt themselves over the Bible. They cannot detect error. They are productive of religious astigmatism. They result in disagreement rather than uniformity. They are readily misunderstood by the historically untutored. It is easier and more worth-while to interpret the New Testament than the creeds. "Creeds are often procrustean beds for the torture of theological thinkers." They cannot be reconciled with "soul freedom." They involve the exchange of the comfort of growth and difference for the strait-jacket of conformity. They themselves constantly undergo change in text and in interpretation. The Bible because of its variety cannot be reduced to a creed. Man's experience of God cannot be listed under five points. Summaries are either too brief and therefore superficial or too extensive and therefore subject to all the laws of interpretation. Life is more than meat, and faith is more than a summary. The church is at the parting of the way. If it gave one-tenth the attention to developing a keen edge for the conscience of the individual, to regenerating itself, to interpreting the religious significance of the industrial, economic, and social transformations of the present, to Christianizing all life which it has been bestowing upon correctness of dogmatic phraseology, the Kingdom of God should become a more thrilling experience for multitudes. But if a summary there must be, it should be biblical. Matthew 22:37-40 should suffice. "And he said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like unto it is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments the whole law hangeth, and the prophets."