

# Firm Foundation

## A History of Confession of Faith

### Prolog

Many times we, as members of what is commonly referred to in ecclesiastical terminology as an Historic Liturgical or Confessional Church, take for granted the creeds and confessional statements to which we subscribe. These statements, in fact, serve the function of articulating our faith as precisely as possible with the greatest economy of words as possible. All of the statements that we will study have been formulated in the crucible of time and struggle, prayer and faith. In a world which, among other things, emphasizes the need for the individual to strike out on his own and confront various views and opinions with the tools of feelings and emotions leading any expedition, it is comforting to know that the creeds we are about to study were developed for affirmation and defense of a Christ-centered faith based upon the facts presented in God's Word. We have not been left to our own devices to uncover the Truth. We are not the first to wrestle with Truth. God has blessed our generation, those before and those to follow, with the summary of deep and abiding statements of faith to which we also subscribe.

These statements were necessarily developed in response to unbiblical and errant theology concerning largely the question of the second Person of the Trinity. These creeds remain valid today and will remain so until the Second Advent. There will always be unbiblical and errant theology concerning the second Person of the Trinity. Not because of fate, but because of human nature. History repeats itself in this arena too because our nature is dominated by pride, arrogance, and rebellion. These creeds provide a succinct measure for us in the absence of humble investigation of the Almighty Triune God.

Look up Matthew 10:32-33. Why is public confession of Christ important? \_\_\_\_\_

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List three common confessions used by the historic/liturgical church.

- 1) *The Apostles' Creed*
- 2) *The Nicene Creed*
- 3) *The Athanasian Creed*

Two of these confessions are technically referred to as Creeds. Which two are they and why are they so referred? *The Apostles and Nicene Creed: They both begin with the Latin*

*word "Credo" which means "I believe" statements of faith.*

List two other confessions. (Hint: one was used first by the early church and contained three words; the other are confessions to which Lutherans subscribe.)

1) Romans 10:9-10 "Jesus is Lord"

2) Book of Concord: 465 AD, each of these are statements which answer the central question of our Christian faith: "Who do you say that I am?" John 6

What observation do you make when you quickly examine the substance of these confessions/creeds from early forms to later forms?

Each time there is a new development in creedal statements the goal of the church is to more clearly articulate the second person of the Trinity.

The course of this study will follow the outline below:

- I. Introduction
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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Scripture and Confession (Creeds)**

#### **i. Arguments against creeds**

Historically, the New Testament church is one which confesses its faith publicly and formally. There are, however, both clergy and laymen alike who question the validity of formal creeds and confessions. The question they ask is, "Should the church at large dispense of creeds and confessions?"

To support their assertion they use five arguments:

- 1) Adding onto Scripture: Only the first creed of these five is written in Scripture: word for word.
- 2) a Limitation of responses to God's love: liturgically

- 3) We cannot record absolute truth "Vienna Circle" 1930, said, language is esoteric. Werner Elert said confession is obsolete because it is impossible to state truths.
- 4) Dead Orthodoxy: becomes stagnant: they want active orthodoxy.
- 5) Antiquated: a time bound by the 16th c. Document.

## ii. Arguments for creeds

To justify the use of creeds one must realize and maintain that confession follows the Scripture and is fundamental to one's response in faith.

What always happens when confessions take precedence over Scripture?

the Scripture become questions as to its sufficiency and ability. What church bodies can you think of where this had happened.

Is it proper to confess our Faith? Matthew 10:32-33

1 Timothy 6:13 Jesus answers affirmatively and truly

Romans 10:9-10 the narrow sense of confession

Six points should be made to support a formal and consistent confession.

1) confession is confession of the Lord Jesus Christ

2) one raised for our justification: no vague ideal

3) confession is not christomonistic: rather it is trinitarian

4) faith and confession are closely related: what we believe

5) commitment to the whole body of revealed truth (concern with the Word)

6) It is a witness

Matthew 10:23 Confession is a part of reality

(Revelation 3:5 Jesus will confess us before the father)

(Romans) 6:6-9 Confession is lead by the Father, this is christocentric, not christomonistic.

On what do these passages focus? They focus on people confessing. and not a confession as such, no written creed. Confession is a natural act of faith in response to the question: "Who do you say that I am?"

### iii. Confessional Documents

As we have said, confession is a natural product of faith. Confession of faith leads to confessional documents such as the Book of Concord.

It is not uncommon to hear people say that the only book we need is the Bible. As a result, efforts are made to do away with such books which contain formal confessions. As we affirm and maintain the doctrine of sola scriptura with what should we be concerned when discussing confessional documents? Should we be concerned with the act of collating such material and subscribing to it or should we direct our attention to the substance of the document?

must look at the substance - this is the link for Scripture to confession.

As a matter of fact, the Greek word for confession in Scripture involves agreement in substance. The Greek word for the simple act of confession alone is not recorded in Scripture.

By concerning ourselves with substance, what principle has been maintained?

Confession flows from Scripture and its sufficiency is maintained.

If we forget this, then we are in danger of combining Scripture and Confession in equal measure.

## B. Motivation for Confessional Documents

### i. Goals of Confessional Documents

There are five reasons, in addition to the natural response of faith, for the church to have and maintain creeds and confessions.

- 1) Means of identifying the church in the world. Makes known the stand in Scripture.
- 2) apologetic and polemic document: directed to those outside the church body.
- 3) Serves the Unity of the Church: division is not a mark: these are not to keep people out.
- 4) popular Instruction: historical precedent.
- 5) assists in maintaining internal discipline: What the word is the guide And Confession the Norm.

### ii. Confessional Subscription and the Gospel

Two positions taken by Lutherans:

- 1) Quia: because they agree with Scripture: classic stand held by the LC-MS
- 2) Quantenus: "in so far as they agree" this is no kind of subscription. Why?

The second form is not used by most Lutherans today. The debate as to whether or not we should subscribe to confessions is small within the Lutheran circles. However, the debate that is growing is what type of subscription should be maintained.

Confessional subscription is an act of confessing in which, in a willing way, the Lutheran Christian proclaims his faith and declares what God's teaching is to the world. This is done by pledging to formal confessions, which include the creeds, in complete assurance that these confessions are true and correct expositions of Scripture.

## II. Apostles' Creed

- 1 *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*
- 2 *And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;*
- 3 *Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary;*
- 4 *Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried;*
- 5 *He descended into hell;*
- 6 *The third day He rose again from the dead;*
- 7 *He ascended into heaven And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;*
- 8 *From Thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*
- 9 *I believe in the Holy Ghost, The holy Christian Church, the communion of saints,*
- 10 *the forgiveness of sins;*
- 11 *The resurrection of the body;*
- 12 *And the life everlasting. Amen.*

Of the three ecumenical creeds, this creed is the oldest. We, as a Lutheran congregation, maintain usage of this Creed for two reasons.

- 1) *To show and maintain UNITY with the historical church*
- 2) *To show and maintain ACCEPTANCE of the historical church.*

### i. Myth

The history of the Apostles' Creed is very long and complicated. It was originally thought to be a direct product of the twelve Apostles. This thought was supported by the coincidence that the Creed contains twelve sentences.

St. Ambrose, in the 4th century, made two conclusions:

- 1) *The apostles did this after the ascension*
- 2) *more grievous to change this creed than revelation (Scripture)*

In addition to this there are 4th and 5th century documents which further support this legendary genesis of the Creed.

This notion came under serious consideration in 1438 at the Council of Florence. For centuries the

Christian church was divided into two major divisions:

- 1) Greek = centered in the east-more mystic in nature.
- 2) Latin=centered in Rome-more realistic in nature.

The Council of Florence was to be a healing council between the Greek and Latin church: East and West. Until this time the Greek church fought the existence of the Apostles' Creed. Their argument was that if this was developed according to the Western tradition, it would be recorded in the book of Acts.

After Florence, any challenge of the Apostles' Creed was constructive. Before this time, two individuals in particular forced dialog on this issue.

- 1) Lorenzo Valla - was a foe of the power of Popes and everything including the apostolic origin of this creed.
- 2) Reginal Pecock, bishop of Asaph of Chichester 1450. denied the doctrine in the creed- Valla recanted, Pecock convicted of heresy. The problem was later ignored because of the Reformation.

Apostolic origin was finally given up as myth by both the Protestant and Roman Catholic church in the 17th century.

## ii. History

### Early Church: 1-3 Centuries

### Statements of Faith

Initially, statements of faith were formulated when the need arose by individuals.

- 1) Missionary emphasis: to hand on and share, outreach
- 2) Christians must speak & teach doctrine: discipling and teaching.
- 3) the essence of the Gospel being reaffirmed: encouragement
- 4) Occasions repeated & statements were needed
- 5) 1 Cor. 15:3: possible statement of Paul.
- 6) Phil. 2:5-11: already familiar

Eventually, these statements were used for baptisms, exorcisms, correspondence between Bishops and during persecution. As a result, these different summaries were collected and became Rules of Faith.

These statements varied in detail from area to area and occasion to occasion. Many times the content was determined by the occasion.

## Rules of Faith

The structure of these statements varied also. There were three basic outlines.

- 1) One Part rule of faith. 1 John 4:15: good example-Christocentric
- 2) Bipartite: God and Christ, less frequent than one part (1 Cor. 8:6 & 2 Tim. 4:1 were still used in 200 A.D.
- 3) Tripartite: Mat 28:19 Words of Christ; 2 Cor 13:14; Paul's formulation.

These existed side by side in the early Church. There was no successive development. Eventually the Tripartite form would be most common. The Trinitarian structure became popular in the 2nd century. By the end of the 2nd century this form was the dominant structure in all congregations. Only the wording was different. There were various texts with no fixed version. There was one common denominator however. What do you think that was?

They were Christocentric

The tripartite form became popular as the result of one of the functions of the church.

This function was Baptism

There are two forms of such baptismal creeds:

- 1) Interrogatory: Question/answer. This form is used in the case of Adult Baptism following instruction. This is the form used in the early church with adult converts. Following 320
- 2) Declaratory: a statement - for infant baptisms: Until a couple of generations ago infant baptism was not widely questioned. Prior to the Reformation Infant baptism was not, in practical terms, questioned.

## The Roman Creed

It was in the context of Baptism and the tripartite form that the ancestor of the Apostles' Creed was written. We do not know who authored the statement nor do we know when this was done. What we do know is that it existed in 175 A.D. and that it was designed to be a Baptismal Creed. The ancestor of the Apostles' Creed is referred to as the Roman Creed or very simply as **R**.

During the second century the church grew at a very rapid pace. Converts were adults from many different pagan groups. When they presented themselves for entry into the church they had to give up former ways. This is proper according to Scripture. There was, however, a distinctly ethical emphasis developing within the various rules of faith which, in retrospect, was very naive, and dangerous.

What was the danger? The Theological significance would be lost - the christocentric nature of the church would decay.

R saw this weakness. It also said that confession is what I believe and not what I am going to do. Another

thought behind the writing of the R symbol was the realization of heretical movements in the church.

## B. Marcionism: Gnostic Influence

Marcion was born in 85 A.D. and died in 140 A.D.. He grew up in a Christian home. His father was wealthy as a result of a shipping business. Exposure to this life style of travel brought Marcion in contact with Cerdo. Cerdo was a gnostic. These two became friends. Marcion was a theologian and a pious Christian. However, he was influenced by Cerdo. Cerdo believed that the God of the Old Testament was not the father of our Lord and not revealed as such. He said the Christ revealed an unknown God.

Marcion studied the Scripture with this presupposition. Then he wrote a book called Antithesis. As a result he was excommunicated.

The book had three claims:

- 1) Based totally on Scripture
- 2) O.T. inspired by an inferior God. Why might that be thought?
- 3) N.T. God of peace and love, grace and mercy. Teaches two Gods who are separate.

To support this, Marcion made his own Canon. Luke and the Epistles of Paul (omitting the Pastorals) comprised his "New Testament." In addition, he removed all important passages and removed prophetic elusions.

## Marcion's Christology

In answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Marcion would have answered:

- 1) Jesus suddenly appeared in 29 A.D.
- 2) Jesus did not have a material body.
- 3) Jesus came directly from heaven.
- 4) Jesus lived a good and just life.
- 5) Creator God crucified Jesus: Recognized him as "good and just being"
- 6) Jesus had no suffering because he had no physical body. Creator realized a contradiction and felt remorse so Creator God gave the souls of those saved to Christ.

He would also have said the problem is evil and that an ascetic life is needed and there is no resurrection of the dead. He would finally conclude that life hereafter would be purely spiritual.



## The Roman Church Offended

Five specific teachings which offended the Roman Church and which the Roman Creed addressed are as follows:

- 1) *God of Christians is not God of Creator but another being of redemption.*
- 2) *Christ is son of God of redemption - not creator*
- 3) *God, father of Christ, being of love and mercy - will judge no one.*
- 4) *Christ was a spirit only - body was a phantom*
- 5) *Denies resurrection of the Flesh.*

The Roman Creed had two purposes then:

- 1) *Antiheretical*
- 2) *Dedactic*

## C. Theology of the Apostles' Creed

In studying its theology we will look at the Roman Creed and compare the two later.

R is a trinitarian creed. We will, however, examine only the Christological statements. There are seven of them.

- 1) *Birth - human origin, Virgin Mary and not simply a virgin. but one prophecied. not a common phrase*
- 2) *Death: under Pontius Pilate (from Scripture) not other creeds - a precise historical reference.*
- 3) *Burial: cannot bury a Phantom*
- 4) *Resurrection: Apostolic assertion*
- 5) *Ascension: linked with the Resurrection: 1 Pet. 3:22*
- 6) *Being Seated: Jesus is ruling Ps. 110: footstool, not as a Phantom*
- 7) *Second Advent: Anti Heretical-central in Eschatology.*

## D. Its Use

Actually R was ancestor to three types of creeds.

- 1) Italian: very few incidental variations: Word under is different.
- 2) North African (Carthage) had additions to R.
- 3) Western European: no one church laid claim: additions & Local thought determined content.

The Apostles' Creed was influenced by the Western European work. This is the last step. We cannot, however, fix the exact date of its composition. The Apostles' Creed (T) eventually replaced R for baptismal use. In the 5th and 6th century R fell into disuse. As a matter of fact, the Nicene Creed took over for no certain reason. For the next 200 years the Nicene Creed was used almost exclusively in the church until the 8th and 9th century. Then the Apostles' Creed took over. It was universally recognized. In 750 A.D. the Apostles' Creed was used in France by a man named Priminus.

## Comparison of R and T

### Seven Changes or Additions

- 1) T adds -"Maker (Creator) of Heaven and Earth"
- 2) T changed from "born" to "conceived."
- 3) T Added (suffered) "and died and was buried."
- 4) Added "Decent into Hell"
- 5) Added "God & Almighty," to: "right hand of the Father."
- 6) Added the word "catholic" or "universal" and "communion of saints"
- 7) Added "life ever lasting"

The Apostles' Creed is simply an elaboration of the Roman Creed.

## III. Nicene Creed

### A. Affirmative Purpose

The Nicene Creed is very different from the Apostles' Creed. Rules of Faith were a local concern until the 4th century. As people traveled from community to community there needed to be a general test of orthodoxy. Councils provided these certifications. The Nicene Creed was the product of one of these Councils. It was a "touchstone" or a test of authenticity.

The Nicene Creed was written to express the majority view at a time of controversy. This creed was the first to claim ecumenical authority and did so in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicea. The controversy against which it was formulated was the Trinitarian Controversy. This was a conflict over the relationship between the Father and the Son. The question was, "How does Jesus relate to the Father?"

## B. The Trinitarian Controversy

Studying the Trinitarian Controversy could take much time. The resources are deep and many. An indepth study of this controversy would be interesting in that it deals with the central issue of Christianity, namely, "Who is Jesus?"

For our purposes we will limit examination to an overview of the problems.

The question of how the Father related to the Son was first proposed by the Apostles. They understood that God became man in Jesus Christ. But then the Apostles spoke and wrote as though Jesus himself was speaking and writing. Therefore it is not surprising to see that the New Testament agrees with itself. But not everyone agreed with the New Testament.

Variations of the understanding that God became man in Jesus began to appear with Justin Martyr. He said that before creation God could not be described as a Trinity. However, he said, there was a logos or reason. Greek Philosophy influenced this thought in that the logos created the world, that is it created material. Logos is divine and all powerful. Still, Jesus Christ is a creature created by God, according to Martyr.

Out of this school of thought emerged a group called the **Subordinationists**. They concluded that Christ is not equal to God.

This did not satisfy everyone and so another theory was developed which was known as **Adoptionism**. A man named Theodotus, in 195 A.D. was a proponent of this theory. He held that Jesus was born of a virgin but still was only a good and righteous man. However, being adopted by God, the Holy Spirit made Jesus Christ. This was to have happened at His baptism. Some of Theodotus' followers denied to Jesus any title to divinity; but others held that He became in some sense divine at His resurrection. Theodotus was excommunicated by Bishop Victor of Rome. However, this view, also referred to as Dynamic Monarchianism, was to continue as one of the oldest forms of heresy.

A man by the name of Paul of Samosata (268 A.D.) propagated dynamic monarchianism in the East at Antioch. He was an able and politically gifted bishop of that city. He maintained that Jesus had the Logos which was an impersonal attribute of the Father. This Logos, or impersonal attribute of the Father, was what inspired Moses and the prophets. Jesus was a man, unique in that He was born of the Virgin, who was also filled with the power of God, i.e., by God's Logos. By this indwelling inspiration Jesus was united in will by love to God, but did not become in substance one with God. So, while the Logos is in every man, it was in Christ more fully. Still Jesus is not God, only divine. Paul of Samosata was excommunicated. But this Christological notion remained.

A third approach to Christology resulted, not by the excommunication of the dynamic monarchians, but rather by the context within which the Christian confession was being developed. It seems that in the environment of heathen polytheism (many gods), the unity of God became an important article of Christian faith. Any Logos concept or Dynamic Monarchianism seemed, to the Christians at that time, in that context, to be a denial of the unity of God.

This approach became known as **Modalistic Monarchianism**. The man most associated with this position was Sabellius who was teaching in Rome about 215 A.D.. The approach stated that there is only one God. He has revealed Himself in three modes.

1) Father: Lawgiver of the Old Testament

2) as Son: He is incarnate

3) as Spirit: He is inspirer of the Apostles

Even though Sabellius was excommunicated, he had a large following and had an impact on the development of the doctrine of the Trinity the center of which is the doctrine of Christ.

It is interesting to note that the "Apostles' Creed" is silent regarding the Logos Christology. While this creed indeed expresses the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, it was found to be an insufficient confession within the contemporary context.

Dionysius, Bishop of Rome (259-268 A.D.), writing against Savellius, expressed in terms, which would eventually surface at Niceae in 325 A.D., the theology which makes the Nicene Creed unique. The center question will be "Who do you say that I am?" The discussion will focus more precisely on the substance of Christ. The slowly evolving confession will address heresies by fine tuning and sufficiently articulating the appropriate Scriptural doctrines. The Western church was satisfied. The eastern church was still divided over this issue.

### Review

We have just outlined three of the four major heresies which the Church addressed before the fifth century. The four heresies which were confronted in the early church continued to reveal themselves in subsequent centuries and to this very day forms of the same are propagated by false teachers. The three heresies which we have just visited are commonly referred to as the Trinitarian controversies and they all deal with Christ. In review list these below:

- 1) Subordinationists
- 2) Adoptionists, Dynamic Monarchians
- 3) Modal Monarchists

The fourth heresy is called Pelagianism: This heresy deals not with the doctrine of God but rather with the doctrine of man.

In the 5th century a man by the name of Coelestius said:

- 1) Adam was made mortal and would have died anyway
- 2) Adam's sin injured only himself
- 3) Newborn children are like Adam before the fall.
- 4) Mankind is not effected by Adam's sin or Christ's resurrection
- 5) The Kingdom of heaven is the Law
- 6) Some men were sinless before Jesus

One can see evidence of each of these heresies today.

The fourth heresy, not being germane to the current discussion, will not be addressed any further.

## Arianism

The first three heresies listed have many variations. One of them is manifested by a man named Arius. While the West was satisfied with the issue of the substance of Christ, the East continued to debate. Arius was the central figure in that debate which was to last sixty years. Arian played an important role in formulating the phrasiology of the Nicene Creed.

Arius was influenced mostly by the Adoptionists. He said that the Father was without beginning; The Son had a beginning. Jesus was God "as a matter of speaking." So he felt the problem was simply resolved when the correct words could be used.

Arius' teaching:

- 1) "The Son was not always"
- 2) "The Logos came from something"
- 3) "We were not created through Him"
- 4) "There was a time when he was not."

There were some differences between Arius and the Adoptionists:

Adoptionists: Christ is all Human.

Arius: Christ had a human body-not a human soul. He has logos; Neither human or divine in the full sense.

In 320 A.D. Arius was excommunicated and force to flee. He gained a large following in the East. His "theology" enveloped the Eastern Church.

There were three arguments which were very attractive in Arianism:

- 1) seems to protect the unity of God
- 2) Satisfies greek idea that God could not create matter
- 3) Doesn't deny the Jesus is the Son of God.

Atypical of most controversies, this one had no fence sitters in the East. Everyone was either for or against Arian's teaching.

## C. Historical Development

## i. Initial Reaction

The ruler at this time was Constantine. His empire is noted for its political unity and theological division. This was a problem for him. Theological division would eventually decay his political strength. So he called a council to straighten this out. 325 A.D. was the year, May 20th to July 25th was the season. This council was the first major one of its kind and is regarded as very important in church history. It is known today as the Council of Niceae.

When the clergy met, there were three different groups:

- 1) *Eusibius of Nicomedia: fully Arian*
- 2) *Anti-Arians of Alexander*
- 3) *Eusibius of Cesarea-(moderate faction: left open the possibility of Arian*

The discussion revolved mostly around one word. This word was:

**Homoousia:** greek word meaning same substance: this Arius could not get around. He wanted the word **Homoiousia** meaning similar substance.

The difficulty in using this term was that it was not an actual word used in Scripture.

- 1) *reluctant to adopt this term.*
- 2) *materialistic concept of God: not good greek thought, God is a spirit*
- 3) *it has varied interpretations in Greek literature*

The term did have advantages both theologically and psychologically.

- 1) **Homoousia** is completely contrary to Arianism: same substance-Psychological advantage in that Arians had already condemned this term
- 2) Theologically same/substance: maintains both an identity and a plurality. The distinction of the two persons is maintained.

The statement of Niceae is not, after all is said and done, the creed as we have it today. There were anathema statements originally attached to the document which were directed toward Arianists. The Arians refused the Nicean statement. They were then exiled.

## ii. Problems of State (Continuing Controversy)

[illegible]

## D. The Theology of the Nicene Creed

We have spent a good deal of time discussing the background and the various reasons behind the development of the Nicene Creed. These discussions have been theological as well. This being the case, there

are only a few additional points to be made concerning the theology of this creed.

The article which is most significant is the second article. We now see it as being anti-arian in that we confess Christ to be sharing fully in both the divine and human natures. Christ is described as the same substance (homoousios).

There was also one additional development which is significant in our understanding (in as much as we can understand) of the Trinity.

The Western church added the term *et filioque* meaning; and the Son.

The Eastern church would not accept this because they could not understand how Christ could produce anything. He is not a creator according to their thinking.

The West reasoned that if one begins to think of Christ in this way then one comes very close to , if not agreeing with, one of the heresies which the church had already dealt with. Can you identify this heresy?

Subordinationism: the west would not accept the eastern view and said there is no subordination of the son.

This is based on verses like John 16:28

So the West said that the best way to articulate this point is to say that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

1) not made

2) not created

3) Begotten and proceeded as an act of love

This is the beginning of what theologians call the Trinitarian Economy. There was an order to the Trinity and terms to express that understanding. We understand the Spirit to have proceeded from the Father and the Son.

When we discuss the Trinity in detail (see Study on Doctrine of God) this Economic understanding will be included. This is, however, a very difficult, if not impossible, concept to grasp and understand. It is no wonder that men throughout the centuries have stumbled on this issue again and again. There is only one way in which we can cling to and maintain the accumulation of Scriptural data which formulates the doctrine of the Trinity.

What is that? Faith

*(the councils: Constantinople, 381-Nicene Creed; Calcedon; 451-reaffirmed N.C. The Nicene Creed was finally used in 471 A.D. in the Eucharist Liturgy.)*

## IV. The Athanasian Creed

Of the three early creeds the Athanasian Creed has the most theology. It has redundant language. It has the harshest things to say.



## A. Development

Of course Athanasius did not compose this creed. Athanasius died in 373 A.D.. On this point the Book of Concord is in error. (p.19). They followed the Christian tradition which said that Athanasius did write this creed. Regular use of this creed occurs in the year 670. When this creed was first used, it was referred to as the faith of St. Athanasius. The problem is that while it was intended to confront heresy, it did not deal with the heresy of the day, namely Arianism as much as it dealt with other heresies. This omission would be curious if Athanasius did compose this creed. Why is that?

Athanasius was not timid about addressing controvesial issues

In addition there were three reasons to deny Athanasian authorship of this creed.

- 1) Athanasian Creed was written in Latin: Athanasius was Greek
- 2) Athanasius is silent about the creed: also the eulogist at his funeral didn't mention it and they were very detailed.
- 3) The theology represents developments after his death.

There are two schools of thought regarding the origin of this creed.

- a) 420-431 by a bishop in Gall. Vincent of Lerine
- b) another says that Ambrose of Milan wrote it (339-397) thought to be a hymn. Problem: Ambrose was obsessed with Creation and it is not part of the Athanasian Creed.

Of these two the first is most likely to be true.

## B. Use of the Creed

The earliest witness to the use of the Athanasian Creed is Caesarius. In 542 A.D. he used it in his preaching.

The best evidence says that this creed was used in a catechetical manner in the 7th century.

By the 8th century it came into general use and by the 10th century it was a popular statement.

During this time in history, priests did not know theology well at all. As a matter of fact, the clergy had very little integrity in comparison to the authority they were given. Charlemange used this creed in an attempt to improve the theology of the priests in the 10th century.

In the 9th century this creed appeared in a worship context as part of the liturgy.

In the 13th century it was translated into Greek. In the 16th century it was acclaimed as one of the great universal creeds in history.

After this point it found its way into the Anglican tradition and was used regularly.

Pope Pius X and XII thought this creed was being used too much so they deregulated its use to Trinity Sunday alone.

## C. The Theology of the Athanasian Creed

This creed has 40 clauses or propositions. These 40 clauses are divided into two groups or sections. (see appendix A) (the following is not in the current editions up to and including 1) Line 3-6:

Line 1-2: *This is the introduction: necessity of belief to salvation:*

Line 3-35: *one central thought: God is trinity in unity and unity in trinity AT ONCE: a paradox - person and substance are not confussed.*

The theological movement of lines 3-25 has five explicit teachings.

- 1) Line 3-6: *two seemingly contradictory truths do not obliterate or divide trinity: a tension between Untiy and Trinity - 3 Persons not confused: One God head.*
- 2) Line 7-14: *various attributes applicable to God & God heads: each person is in the fullness of the Godhead. Still not three eternal: One eternal.*
- 3) Line 15-19: *not a tritheism: a Unified Godhead: everything can be said of each person.*
- 4) Line 20-24: *what is the difference: this is a problem of Divine Relations. In one respect they differ in the relation they have with regard to origin. No source: of the Father, not begotten; Son is generated, not made, H.S. proceeds, not by creation or generation.*
- 5) Line 25: *Co-equal. Co-eternal. None is greater or prior to the other: Indivisibility of God.*

## D. Heresies Confronted

First and foremost, this creed is a positive statement of catholic faith. This is what it takes to be Christian. It is not first to be an anti-heretical statement.

Line 26, however, is a transition to the second section. In this section heresies are confronted.

- 1) Line 28-29: *Incarnation: at once fully God/Man - includes a rationale mind - a twofold generation. 1) eternal; 2) time limit. Arianism is confronted.*
- 2) Line 34-37: *Unity of person - not an intermingling existence but complete unification. Syballianism said, three modes.*

Two other heresies needed to be confronted. These two were Apollonarianism and Nestorianism.

### Apollonarianism

Apollonarius was a lyodicean Bishop. He said that when the Son took human form - Divine reason took the place of human reason. Not fully man but fully God. 381 condemned at Constantinople.

Line 30: This line also addresses this problem.

### Nestorianism

This heresy dealt with the two natures of Christ. This was called the Christological controversy of the 5th century. Actually this problem is an old one with a new twist.

- 1) West: fully divine and fully human. United: unmixed - problem, there were a lot of difficult questions.
- 2) East Antioch - Stressed the human nature of Christ. not denying the Divine Nature.
- 3) East Alexandria: Stress Divine Nature, not denying human nature: Doc. of Salvation their specialty: Athanasius' strong point.

One term, which was used almost as an accident in the East became the center of controversy. This term was Theotokes (θεοτοκος) which means Mother of God. The problem with this term is that, while the human nature of Jesus is recognized, it is virtually ignored.

A man named Nestorius, from Antioch, did not like this term. To explain his position, he said that the human form of Jesus was accompanied by the Divine; therefore, Mary was not the mother of God. Jesus, he said, possessed the Godhead but was not actually God. Jesus has God within him.

Nestorius was condemned by Cereus of Alexandria. A council was subsequently called to meet in Ephesus in 431 A.D. When they met, they eventually condemned each other and the action against Nestorius was declared illegal. Still, everyone accepted Nestorius' banishment.

It is interesting to note that Nestorian missionaries were the first to bring Christianity to China in the 7th century.

The Athanasian Creed deals with this heresy in lines 32-34.

### Loose Ends

Line 38-49: It is said that this reflects works righteousness: but good works necessarily reflects faith: thus there is no difficulty: the beginning of good work is salvation.

For this creed to be significant, one does not need to know the theological jargon. Neither does one have to frame their faith in this creed.

What this creed does do is remind the Christian that there are limits within which he is expected to live. In other words, the Christ-centered person cannot believe anything he chooses to believe. There are definite fundamentals which must be maintained if one is responding in faith.

## Review

- 1) *Athanasian Creed is a summary of Orthodox teaching: for instructional purpose.*
- 2) *Region of Origin: Spain or Gall*
- 3) *Date: between 435-535, no earlier than Nestorius.*
- 4) *Authorship: most popular is Vincent of Lerine: At least influenced by this order of Monks.*

## V. Conclusion

We have just completed a fairly extensive review of the three historical creeds. It is most interesting that these confessions were developed as a result of the need for the Christian to articulate his faith and understanding of who the Triune God is. The central article in each of these confessions is Christ. It is also interesting to note that as the years went by, the length of these confessions grew. As the world became more complex it forced the church to become more articulate in its confession. We must be as specific as possible in communicating our faith to those outside of faith. Of course we still confess the "Jesus is Lord" just as the first disciples did. The question Jesus asked demands an answer of every human being, namely, "Who do you say that I am?" And we say as Peter confessed by faith, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

## Appendix A

### **The Creed of Athanasius.**

Written against the Arians.

- 1] Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic faith.
- 2] Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
- 3] And the Catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
- 4] Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.
- 5] For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.
- 6] But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.
- 7] Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.
- 8] The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.
- 9] The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.
- 10] The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.
- 11] And yet they are not three Eternals, but one Eternal.
- 12] As there are not three Uncreated nor three Incomprehensibles, but one Uncreated and one Incomprehensible.
- 13] So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty.
- 14] And yet they are not three Almighty, but one Almighty.
- 15] So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God.
- 16] And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
- 17] So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord.

**18]** And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.

**19]** For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord,

So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, There be three Gods, or three Lords.

**20]** The Father is made of none: neither created nor begotten.

**21]** The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created, but begotten.

**22]** The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

**23]** So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

**24]** And in this Trinity none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another;

**25]** But the whole three Persons are coeternal together, and coequal: so that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped.

**26]** He, therefore, that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.

**27]** Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe faithfully the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**28]** For the right faith is, that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;

**29]** God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the substance of His mother, born in the world;

**30]** Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.

**31]** Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood;

**32]** Who, although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but one Christ:

**33]** One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God;

**34]** One altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.

**35]** For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ;

**36]** Who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;

**37]** He ascended into heaven; He sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty; from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

**38]** At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give an account of their own works.

**39]** And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.

**40]** This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.