

Important Creeds and Councils of the Christian Church

By Charles R. Biggs

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Class I: Introduction to the Creeds

"A Creed, or Rule of Faith, or Symbol is a confession of faith for public use, or a form of words setting forth with authority certain articles of belief, which are regarded by the framers as necessary for salvation, or at least for the well-being of the Christian Church."- Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*

Generally, a creed is always the direct result of dogmatic controversy, and more or less directly or indirectly polemical against opposing error.

What is the difference between polemics and apologetics?

What is a confession of faith in relation to a creed? Matt. 10:32,33; Romans 10:9,10; Matt. 16 (the first Christian confession or creed). Where there is faith, there is also a profession of that faith.

A confession or creed can come from Scriptural study without any individual authorship (such as the Apostle's Creed); or from an ecumenical council (such as the Nicene or Chalcedon); or from the Synod of a particular church (such as the decrees of the Council of Trent; the Articles of Dort; the Westminster Confession and Catechisms); or from a number of divines specifically commissioned for such work by ecclesiastical authority (such as the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; the Heidelberg Catechism; the Form of Concord); or from an individual (such as the Augsburg Confession by Philip Melancthon; the Catechisms of Luther; the second Helvetic Confession by Bullinger).

In Protestantism the authority of creeds must be submitted to the light and revelation of Scripture. The Scripture is the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In contrast, the Greek Church holds that from the Council of Nicea (325 AD) to the Second Nicea (787 AD), these councils were infallible. Rome extends the same claim to the Council of Trent (1546-1564) and the Second Vatican Council (1962). Both these claims cannot logically be true, since both of these "infallible" Councils contradict each other on important points, especially the authority of the Pope.

What is the *theologia archetypa*? What is the *theologia ectypa*? What is the *theologia viatorum (ante-lapsum and post-lapsum)*?

Creeds and Confessions, when submitted to Scriptural authority are the summaries of the doctrines of the Bible. They are standards and guards against false doctrine and practice.

The importance of Catechetical instruction to children:

Those groups opposed to creeds: Socinians, Quakers, Unitarians and Rationalists. They objected because they feared that creeds obstruct free interpretation of the Bible and interfere with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment; they produce division, dogmatic indifference, skepticism, and infidelity. History teaches that those sects which reject creeds are as much under the authority of a traditional system or of certain favorite writers, and as much exposed to controversy, division and change as churches with formal creeds.

What is the Reformed teaching on private interpretation and the perspicuity of Scripture?

The Creeds of Christendom are divided into four classes: (1) The Ecumenical Councils of the Ancient Catholic (Universal) Church (the orthodox doctrine of God and of Christ and the fundamental dogmas of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation); (2) The Symbols of the Greek or Oriental Church (the Greek faith is set forth in distinction from Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Protestant Churches. They differ from Roman Creeds in the doctrines of the procession of the Holy Spirit and the papacy. They are in agreement over the rules of faith such as justification by faith, the church and the sacraments, worship of saints and relics, and the hierarchy and the monastic system); (3) The Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church (the distinctive doctrines of Romanism which were opposed by the Reformers are from the Council of Trent to the Vatican Council in 1870); (4) The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches (Most of them date from the Reformation and agree with the Ancient Catholic creeds but ingraft the Augustinian doctrines of sin and grace, and several doctrines in anthropology and soteriology (justification and atonement) which had never been previously settled by the Church in an exclusive way).

The Protestant Creeds are either Lutheran or Reformed. The Lutheran were all made in Germany from AD 1530 to 1577, the Reformed arose in different countries: Germany, Switzerland, France, Holland, Hungary, Poland, England, Scotland and wherever the influence of Calvin and Zwingli extended. They both agree almost entirely in their theology, christology, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology, but they differ in the doctrines of divine decrees and of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments, especially the mode of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

Later Evangelical denominations: Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Arminians and Methodists acknowledge the leading doctrines of the Reformation, but differ from Lutheranism and Calvinism in a number of articles such as anthropology, the Church, the sacraments, and especially on Church polity and discipline. Their creeds are modifications and abridgments rather than enlargements of the old Protestant, Reformed Creeds. Many Churches today have only the creed of the particular pastor in the pulpit.

The Progression of the Creeds are much like the revealed Systematic Theology of the Scriptures. There is a building pattern to the way the truths of Scripture are laid upon the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets.

Next Week: Introduction to the Four Ecumenical Creeds: The Apostle's, The Nicene, The Athanasian, and the Chalcedonian. Please read the Apostle's Creed handouts for next class.