

Important Creeds and Councils of the Christian Church

By Charles R. Biggs

Many Thanks to William Barker, Daryl Hart, and Clair Davis for their Church History Lectures. Also to John Gerstner, Philip Schaff, and Williston Walker. I have benefited from their writings.

Class II: The Apostle's Creed and the Ecumenical Councils

The foundation for all creeds: Acts 2:41-42

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)
- 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)
- 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).

The Apostle's Creed

The Rule of faith (regula fidei) in the early Church, was a doctrinal summary of Christianity that grew out of the necessity of catechetical instruction and a public confession of candidates for baptism. The confession of Peter (Matt. 16:16) was the foundation, and the baptismal formula (Matt. 28:19) furnished the trinitarian framework of the earliest creeds. This summary of Christian doctrine has been called the Apostle's Creed because it was believed that it was the product of the Apostles who prepared it as a summary of their teaching before leaving Jerusalem. Rather, the Apostle's creed was a development over a period of time. It is the only strictly ecumenical creed of the West, as the Nicene Creed is the only ecumenical Creed of the East.

What is Gnosticism?

Summary of teachings: Physical universe is evil and God did not make it. God could not have taken a human body, but distinguished between the divine Christ and the man Jesus (Docetism, Eutychianism, Nestorianism arose from Gnostic teachings). The teachings or knowledge of Christianity could only be understood by a select number of people and that men did not need forgiveness but enlightenment. The ultimate goal of the Gnostics was to be free from the taint of matter and the shackles of the body and to return to the realm as Pure Spirit.

The Ecumenical Councils The Creeds and Councils of Christendom are divided into four classes:

- (1) The Ecumenical Councils of the Ancient Catholic (Universal) Church
- (2) The Symbols of the Greek or Oriental Church
- (3) The Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church
- (4) The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches.

The first four creeds including the Apostle's are accepted by all the church whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

Quote from the Scots Confession of 1560: "So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them. But if men, under the name of a council, pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or to make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrine of devils, drawing our souls from the voice of the one God to follow the doctrines of men. The reason why the general councils met was not to make any permanent law which God had not made before, nor yet to form new articles for our belief, nor to give the Word of God authority...but the reason for councils, at least of those which deserve the name, was partly to refute heresies, and to give public confession of their faith to the generations following, which they did by the authority of God's written Word, and not by any opinion or prerogative that they could not err by reason of their numbers. This, we judge, was the primary reason for general councils. The second was that good policy and order should be constituted and observed in the Kirk (church) where, as in the house of God, it becomes all things to be done decently and in order."

1. The First Ecumenical, or Council of Nicea (325)- lasted two months and twelve days. Three hundred eighteen bishops were present. The Emperor Constantine was also present. To this council we owe the Creed (symbolum) of Nicea, defining against Arius the true Divinity of the Son of God (homousios / omousios), and the fixing of the date for keeping Easter (against the Quartodecimans).
2. The Second Ecumenical, or First General Council of Constantinople (381)- under Pope Damasus and the Emperor Theodosius I, was attended by one hundred fifty bishops. To the above mentioned Nicene creed it added the clauses referring to the Holy Ghost and defined His deity.
3. The Third Ecumenical, or Council of Ephesus (431)- more than two hundred bishops, presided over by Cyril of Alexandria representing Pope Celestine I. It defined the true personal unity of Christ, declared Mary the Mother of God (bearer of God- Qeotoko) against Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, and renewed the condemnation of Pelagius.
4. The Fourth Ecumenical, or Council of Chalcedon (451)- one hundred fifty bishops under Pope Leo the Great and the Emperor Marcian defined the two natures (divine and human) in Christ against Eutyches, who was excommunicated.
5. The Fifth Ecumenical, or Second General Council of Constantinople (553)- of one hundred sixty five bishops under Pope Vigilius and Emperor Justinian I, condemned errors of Origen and certain writings of Theodoret, Theodore Bishop of Mopsuetia (The Three Chapters). It further confirmed the first four general councils, especially that of Chalcedon whose authority was contested by heretics.
6. The Sixth Ecumenical, or Third Council of Chalcedon (680)- under Pope Agatho and the Emperor Constantine Pogonatus, was attended by the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Antioch, one hundred seventy four bishops, and the emperor. It put an end to Monothelism by defining two wills in Christ, the Divine and the human, as two distinct principles of operation.
7. The Seventh Ecumenical, or Second Council of Nicea (787)- was convoked by Emperor Constantine VI and his mother Irene, under Pope Adrian I, was presided over by the legates of Pope Adrian. It regulated the veneration of holy images.

Next Week: The Nicene Creed and Heresies of the Early Church

For Next Class: Please read the Apostle's Creed, Notes by Martin Luther and the Nicene Creed.