

Important Creeds and Councils of the Christian Church

By Charles R. Biggs

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Class III: The Ecumenical Councils and the Nicene Creed

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."

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/ omousio V), and the fixing of the date for keeping Easter (against the Quartodecimans).

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.

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 V) against Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, and renewed the condemnation of Pelagius.

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.

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 Mopsucia (The Three Chapters). It further confirmed the first four general councils, especially that of Chalcedon whose authority was contested by heretics.

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.

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.

The Nicene Creed The Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted and used brief statements of the Christian Faith. Many groups that do not have a tradition of using it in their services nevertheless are committed to the doctrines that it teaches (such groups as: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists).

Traditionally in the West, the Apostle's Creed is used at baptisms, and the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist. The East uses only the Nicene Creed.

As the Apostle's Creed was developed and drawn up, the chief enemy was gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was truly man; the emphasis of the Creed reflects this concern. However, when the Nicene Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully God.

What is Arianism?

Arius was a presbyter in Alexandria in Egypt in the early 300's (4th c.). He taught that the Father, in the beginning created (or begot) the Son, and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world. The result of this was to make the Son a created being, and hence not God in any meaningful sense (but the closest thing to it). Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, sent for Arius and questioned him. Arius did not recant from his position and was excommunicated by a council of Egyptian bishops. The Arian position has been revived in our own day by the Watchtower Society, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hail Arius as a great witness to the truth.

Emperor Constantine summoned a council of Bishops in Nicea, and in 325 the Bishops of the Church, repudiated Arius and produced the first draft of what is now called the Nicene Creed.

Athanasius was the defender of orthodoxy in this period that opposed Arius. He became Bishop of Alexandria after the death of Alexander and was the spokesman for the full deity of Christ.

Think about this: Was Mary the Mother of God? Did God die on the cross? If God became man, how can He be immutable, or without change in His character? Isn't it contradictory to say that God is one and also three? Is Christ similar (homoiousios/omousios), or like the Father, or is he the same (homoousios/omousios) in essence as the Father?

Next Week: The Nicene Creed II & Heresies of the Early Church
For Next Class: Please read the Creed of Constantinople.