

History and Survey of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Roman Persecution - 64 AD-313 AD

Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian

the Christian faith continued to grow and that in a hearty fashion

It harden the resolve for witness/testimony

but also called for a clear understanding

of what it is that Christians believe

and what they are living/dying for.

It also meant a more intense jealousy

for the purity of that message

against those who would reduce it

to theological error or philosophical debate.

Persecution ended with the Edict of Milan in 313.

Constantine (306-337)

The church had grown dramatically along with its influence.

With Constantine's conversion to Christianity at the Milvan Bridge,

the Christian faith became tolerable and legal

and grew quickly into religion of the empire.

Uniting the church's witness and mission became paramount.

The empire had become Christian,

and the emperor was now the head protectorate of it.

A major disagreement in doctrine had arisen: Arianism.

Arianism challenged the nature of Christ -

is he God or someone that God made?

In 325 AD, Constantine called for a council of church leaders

to meet in Nicaea.

Constantine took charge to deal with the religious controversy -

which lent even more legitimacy and officialdom to the faith.

He invited 1,800 bishops from all over the empire

(1,000 from the east and 800 from the west;

although the actual attendees

only numbered between 2-4 hundred.

They met in nearby Nicaea for 3 months.

The result was

that they condemned Arianism

and produced the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.
By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];
Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;
He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
And in the Holy Ghost.

The creed clearly focuses on the humanity
as well as the deity of Christ,
the tri-unity of the godhead,
and the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

Seven Councils

More councils followed the one in Nicaea in 325 AD,
each proving the veracity of challenges to the orthodox faith,
and the need for precision of language and definition of terms.

2) Constantinople (381) -

a) The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed enjoyed normative status within the church to this day. "Of course, the Western addition of the dual procession of the Spirit ('Who proceeds from the Father and the Son') at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 has been a source of East/West contention ever since, but, with this one exception, there is no debate about the rest of the creed's teachings.

b) It considerably develops the deity of the Holy Spirit.

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; And He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom shall have no end.
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Creator of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, Who spoke through the prophets.
In one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.
I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.

3) The 1st Council of Ephesus (431) -

Taking the nonbiblical term *homoousion* from 325,
it was possible to build on previous work of definition
and doctrinal definement.

"Once the term is officially adopted, it then plays a constructive part in setting the terms of future debates." (Trueman, p. 97)

“[I]f humanity too has its own substance, how do these two substances, the divine and the human, relate to each other in Christ? And, more specifically, how do the two substances relate to each other in a way that does not create either two persons (albeit occupying one geographical space) or some peculiar blend or fusion of the two substances that leads to the formation of a third substance, which is neither divine nor human? ... This is one of the reasons why theology cannot simply be done by reading the Bible: the fine-tuning of concepts and vocabulary is a cumulative and traditional exercise.” (C. Trueman, p. 97)

As the councils continued to develop doctrinal definition,
dissent and political maneuvering become more and more a factor.

“[The Council of Ephesus] is the last council which the Coptic churches in the East acknowledge as authoritative. Known as monophysite (‘one nature’) churches, these reject the later teaching of the Council of Chalcedon that Christ has two natures in one person.” (Trueman, p. 99)

This will continue to be an issue
which will be involved in the great schism at the turn of the millennium.

4) Council of Chalcedon (451) – This is “[t]he last of the early councils which is of major relevance to modern Protestantism” (Trueman, p. 99)

Christ must be fully God;
and Christ must be fully human yet w/two natures
not mixed nor separated.

A strong element of negative theology – defining boundaries
It generates its own fresh questions. 2 wills?

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the Godbearer; once and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature begin preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

Athanasian Creed

“While this is not an ecumenical creed in the sense of having been produced and ratified by an ecumenical council, it has nonetheless played a significant role in the life of the church, both East and (especially) West.” (Trueman, p. 102)

- 1) The length of the creed indicates a development of thought and the need for a comprehensive creedal statement.
- 2) The unity and parity of the Trinity is stressed clearly.
More defined understanding as to the positive nature of the Christian faith.
- 3) It begins and ends with anathemas.
 - a. It closes the door, rather than opens it.

This is exclusive rather than inclusive.

- b. There are no other options open for salvation hope.
- c. It uses the word "catholic" repeatedly,
 stressing the universal nature of the gospel.

"Exclusion for the sake of elitism or based upon hate and prejudice is deeply wrong and harmful, and the church needs to repudiate such and avoid it at all costs. Yet we cannot as Christians avoid the fact that the faith is always exclusive in some sense, that this exclusivity is expressed in part by public doctrinal commitments, and that the holding of certain positions and the rejection of others determines whether one is included or excluded. ... Thus, boundaries, and the drawing of them, are absolutely vital to healthy, orthodox Christianity. ... The response, of course, might be that ... [such creeds] seems to demand belief in something that is not explicitly stated in Scripture. But ... that kind of objection is not a particularly compelling one. What is stated here rests upon the teaching of Scripture, and the implications of that teaching. It is conceptually consistent with the Bible, even if its terminology is actually absent from the same." (Trueman, p. 103-04)

"With the exception of the Coptic Church's rejection of Chalcedon, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants (Lutheran and Reformed) all accept that these creeds are basically the gold standard for talking about Christ." (Trueman, p. 106)

The Athanasian Creed

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being.

Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually as both God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone. The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone. The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten; he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers; there is one Son, not three sons; there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier, we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity.

But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.

Now this is the true faith: That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally.

He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to himself. He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person. For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human.

He suffered for our salvation; he descended to hell; he arose from the dead; he ascended to heaven; he is seated at the Father's right hand; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will arise bodily and give an accounting of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith: one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.