

A SHORT HISTORY
OF
CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

by
Dr. A. A. Hodge

Copyright (Public Domain)

www.reformedontheweb.com/home/.html

(Reformed on the Web)

A Short History of Creeds and Confessions

by

Dr. A. A. Hodge

It is asserted in the first chapter of this Confession [*The Westminster Confession of Faith*], and vindicated in this exposition that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, having been given by inspiration of God, are for man in his present state the only and the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice. All that man is to believe concerning God, and the entire duty which God requires of man, are revealed therein, and are to be believed and obeyed because contained therein, because it is the word of God. This divine word, therefore, is the only standard of doctrine which has intrinsic authority binding the conscience of men. And all other standards are of value or authority only in proportion as they teach what the Scriptures teach.

While, however, the Scriptures are from God, the understanding of them belongs to the part of men. Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this, and all make it obvious that they do it by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds and confessions. If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.

As we would have anticipated, it is a matter of fact that the Church has advanced very gradually in this work of the accurate interpretation of Scripture and definition of the great doctrines which compose the system of truth it reveals. The attention of the Church has been specially directed to the study of one doctrine in one age, and of another doctrine in another age. And

as she has thus gradually advanced in the clear discrimination of gospel truth, she has at different periods set down an accurate statement of the results of her new attainments in a Creed or Confession of Faith, for the purpose of preservation and popular instruction. In the mean time, heretics spring up on all occasions, who pervert the Scriptures, who exaggerate certain aspects of the truth and deny others equally essential, and thus in effect turn the truth of God into a lie. The Church is forced, therefore, on the great principle of self-preservation, to form such accurate definitions of every particular doctrine misrepresented as shall include the whole truth and exclude all error, and to make such comprehensive exhibitions of the system of revealed truth as a whole that no one part shall be either unduly diminished or exaggerated, but the true proportion of the whole be preserved. At the same time, provision must be made for ecclesiastical discipline, and to secure the real co-operation of those who profess to work together in the same cause, so that public teachers in the same communion may not contradict one another, and the one pull down what the other is striving to build up. Formularies must also be prepared, representing as far as possible the common consent, and clothed with public authority, for the instruction of the members of the Church, and especially of the children.

Creeds and Confessions, therefore, have been found necessary in all ages and branches of the Church, and, when not abused, have been useful for the following purposes:

- (1.) To mark, disseminate and preserve the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the Church in any crisis of its development.
- (2.) To discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and to present it in its integrity and due proportions.
- (3.) To act as the basis of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony.
- (4.) To be used as instruments in the great work of popular instruction.

It must be remembered, however, that the matter of these Creeds and Confessions binds the consciences of men only so far as it is purely scriptural, and because it is so; and as to the form in which that matter is stated, they bind those only who have voluntarily subscribed the Confession, and because of that subscription.

In all churches a distinction is made between the terms upon which private members are admitted to membership, and the terms upon which office-bearers are admitted to their sacred trusts of teaching and ruling. A Church has no right to make anything a condition of membership which Christ has not made a condition of salvation. The Church is Christ's fold. The sacraments are the seals of his covenant. All have a right to claim admittance who make a credible profession of the true religion – that is, who are presumptively the people of Christ. This credible profession of course involves a competent knowledge of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity – a declaration of personal faith in Christ and consecration to his service, and a temper of mind and habit consistent therewith. On the other hand, no man can be inducted into any office in any Church who does not protest to believe in the truth and wisdom of the constitution and laws which it will be his duty to conserve and administer. Otherwise all harmony of sentiment and all efficient co-operation in action would be impossible.

The original Synod of our American Presbyterian Church in the year 1729 solemnly adopted the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* as the doctrinal standards of the Church. The record is as follows:

“All the ministers of the Synod now present, which were eighteen in number, except one, that declared himself not prepared, [but who gave his assent at the next meeting], after proposing all the scruples any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the *Confession of Faith*, and *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the Confession of their Faith, except only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, ‘Concerning the Civil Magistrate.’”

Again, in the year 1788, preparatory to the formation of the General Assembly,

“the Synod, having fully considered the draught of the Form of Government and Discipline, did, on review of the whole, and hereby do, ratify and adopt the same, as now altered and amended, as the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, and order the same to be considered and strictly observed as the rule of their proceedings,

‘by all the inferior judicatories belonging to the body.

“The Synod, having now revised and corrected the draught of a Directory for Worship, did approve and ratify the same, and do hereby appoint the same Directory, as now amended, to be the Directory for the worship of God in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. They also took into consideration the *Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, and, having made a small amendment of the Larger, did approve and do hereby approve and ratify the said Catechisms, as now agreed on, as the Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. And the Synod order that the Directory and Catechisms be printed and bound up in the same volume with the *Confession of Faith* and the *Form of Government and Discipline*; that the whole be considered as the standard of our doctrine, government, discipline and worship, agreeably to the resolutions of the Synod in their present session.”

What follows is a very brief and general history of the principal Creeds and Confessions of the several branches of the Christian Church. In this statement they are grouped according to the order of time and the churches which adhere to them:

I. *The ancient Creeds, which express the common faith of the whole Church.*

The Creeds formed before the Reformation are very few, relate to the fundamental principles of Christianity, especially the Trinity and the Person of the God-man, and are the common heritage of the whole Church.

1st. The Apostles' Creed. This was not written by the apostles, but was gradually formed, by common consent, out of the Confessions adopted severally by particular churches, and used in the reception of its members. It reached its present form, and universal use among all the churches, about the close of the second century. This Creed was appended to the *Shorter Catechism*, together with the *Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments*, in the first edition published by order of Parliament, “not as though it were composed by the apostles, or ought to be esteemed canonical Scripture, . . . but because it is a brief sum of Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ.” It was retained by the framers of our Constitution as part of the Catechism.^[1]

It is as follows:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell (Hades); the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”

2d. *The Nicene Creed.* This Creed is formed on the basis of the Apostles’ Creed, the clauses relating to the consubstantial divinity of Christ being contributed by the great Council held in Nice in Bithynia, A.D. 325, and those relating to the divinity and personality of the Holy Ghost added by the Second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople, A.D. 381; and the “*filioque*” clause added by the Council of the Western Church, held at Toledo, Spain, A.D. 569. In its present form it is the Creed of the whole Christian Church, the Greek Church rejecting only the last added clause. It is as follows:

“I believe in one God, Maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord the Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the prophets. And I believe in one Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

3d. As subsequently heretical opinions sprang up in its bosom with respect to the constitution of the person of Christ, the Church was forced to provide additional definitions and muniments of the truth. One heretical tendency culminated in Nestorianism, which maintains that the divine and human natures in Christ constitute two persons. This was condemned by the *Creed of the Council of Ephesus*, A.D. 431. The opposite heretical tendency culminated in Eutychianism, which maintains that the divine and human natures are so united in Christ as to form but one nature. This was condemned by the *Council of Chalcedon*, A.D. 451. These Creeds, defining the faith of the Church as embracing two natures in one person, are received and approved by the entire Church. They are sufficiently quoted in the body of the following “*Commentary*.”

4th. *The Athanasian Creed.* This Creed was evidently composed long after the death of the great theologian whose name it bears, and after the controversies closed and the definitions established by the above-mentioned Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. It is a grand and unique monument of the unchangeable faith of the whole Church as to the great mysteries of godliness, the Trinity of Persons in the one God and the duality of natures in the one Christ.

It is too long to quote here in full. What relates to the Person of the God-man is as follows:

“**27.** But it is necessary to eternal salvation that he should also faithfully believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

28. It is therefore true faith that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is both God and man.

29. He is God; generated from eternity from the substance of the Father; man born in time from the substance of his Mother.

30. Perfect God, perfect man, subsisting of a rational soul and human flesh.

31. Equal to the Father in respect to his divinity, less than the Father in respect to his humanity.

32. Who, although he is God and man, is not two, but one Christ.

33. But two not from the conversion of divinity into flesh, but from the assumption of his humanity into God.

34. One not at all from confusion of substance, but from unity of Person.

35. For as rational soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ," etc.

II. *The Creeds and Confessions of the different branches of the Church since the Reformation.*

1st. The Doctrinal Standards of the Church of Rome.

In order to oppose the progress of the Reformation, Pope Paul III. called the last great ecumenical *Council at Trent* (1545-1563). The deliverances of this Council, entitled *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, form the highest doctrinal rule known to that Church. The decrees contain the positive statements of doctrine The canons explain the decrees, distribute the matter under brief heads and condemn the opposing of Protestant doctrine on each point.

The Roman Catechism, which explains and enforces the canons of the *Council of Trent*, was prepared and promulgated by the authority of Pope Pius IV., AD. 1556.

The *Tridentine Confession of Faith* was also imposed upon all the priests and candidates of the Romish Church and converts from other churches.

In addition to these, different papal bulls and some private writings have been authoritatively set up as standards of the true faith by the authority of popes; e.g., the *Catechism of Bellarmine*, A.D. 1603, and the bull *Unigenitus* of Clement XI., 1711.

The theology taught in all these papal standards is Arminianism.

2d. The Doctrinal Standards of the Greek Church.

The ancient Church divided from causes primarily political and ecclesiastical, secondarily doctrinal and ritual, into two great sections – the Eastern or Greek Church, and the Western or Latin Church. This division began to culminate in the seventh, and was consummated in the eleventh century. The Greek Church embraces Greece, the majority of the Christians of the Turkish Empire and the great mass of the civilized inhabitants of Russia. All the Protestant churches have originated through the Reformation from the Western or Roman Church.

This Church arrogates to herself pre-eminently the title of the “*orthodox*,” because the original creeds defining the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, which have been mentioned above, were produced in the Eastern half of the ancient Church, and hence are in a peculiar sense her inheritance. Greek theology is very imperfectly developed beyond the ground covered by these ancient creeds, which that Church magnifies and maintains with singular tenacity.

They possess also a few confessions of more modern date, as “*The Orthodox Confession*” of Peter Mogilas, A.D. 1642, metropolitan bishop of Kiew, the *Confession of Gennadius*, A.D. 1453.

3d. *The Confessions of the Lutheran Church.*

The entire Protestant world from the time of the Reformation has been divided into two great families of churches – the LUTHERAN, including all those which received their characteristic impress from the great man whose name they bear; the REFORMED, including all those, on the other hand, which derived their character from Calvin.

The Lutheran family of churches embraces all those Protestants of Germany and the Baltic provinces of Russia who adhere to the Augsburg Confession, together with the national churches of Denmark, of Norway and Sweden, and the large denomination of that name in America.

Their Symbolical Books are:

The Augsburg Confession, the joint authors of which were Luther and Melancthon. Having been signed by the Protestant princes and leaders, it was presented to the emperor and imperial Diet in Augsburg A.D. 1530. It is the oldest Protestant confession, the ultimate basis of Lutheran theology, and the only universally accepted standard of the Lutheran churches.

The Apology (Defence) of the Augsburg Confession, prepared by Melancthon A.D. 1530, and subscribed by the Protestant theologians A.D. 1537 at Smalcald.

The Larger and Smaller Catechisms, prepared by Luther A.D. 1529, “the first for the use of preachers and teachers, the last as a guide in the instruction of youth.”

The Articles of Smalcald, drawn up by Luther A.D. 1535, and subscribed by the evangelical theologians in February, A.D. 1537, at the place whose name

they hear.

The Formula Concordiae (Form of Concord), prepared in A.D. 1577 by Andrea and others for the purpose of settling certain controversies which had sprung up in the Lutheran Church, especially concerning the relative activities of divine grace and the human will in regeneration, and concerning the nature of the Lord's presence in the Eucharist. This confession contains a more scientific and thoroughly developed statement of the Lutheran doctrine than can be found in any other of their public symbols. Its authority is, however, acknowledged only by the high Lutheran party; that is, by that party in the Church which consistently carries the peculiarities of Lutheran theology out to the most complete logical development.

4th. *The Confessions of the Reformed or Calvinistic churches.*

The Reformed churches embrace all those churches of Germany which subscribe the *Heidelberg Catechism*; the Protestant churches of Switzerland, France, Holland, England and Scotland: the Independents and Baptists of England and America, and the various branches of the Presbyterian Church in England and America.

The Reformed Confessions are very numerous, although they all substantially agree as to the system of doctrine they teach. Those most generally received, and regarded as of the highest symbolical authority as standards of the common system, are the following:

The Second Helvetic Confession, prepared by Bullinger, A.D. 1564. "It was adopted by all the Reformed churches in Switzerland, with the exception of Basle (which was content with its old symbol, the First Helvetic), and by the Reformed churches in Poland, Hungary, Scotland and France,"^[2] and has always been regarded as of the highest authority by all the Reformed churches.

The Heidelberg Catechism, prepared by Ursinus and Olevianus, A.D. 1562. It was established by civil authority, the doctrinal standard, as well as instrument of religious instruction for the churches of the Palatinate, a German State at that time including both banks of the Rhine. It was endorsed by the *Synod of Dort*, and is the *Confession of Faith* of the Reformed churches of Germany and Holland, and of the German and Dutch Reformed churches in America.

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. These were originally drawn up by Cranmer and Ridley, A.D. 1551, and revised and reduced to the present number by the bishops, at the order of Queen Elizabeth, A.D. 1562. These Articles are Calvinistic in doctrine, and constitute the doctrinal standard of the Episcopal churches in England, Scotland, America and the Colonies.

The Canons of the Synod of Dort. This famous Synod was convened in Dort, Holland, by the authority of the States General, for the purpose of settling the questions brought into controversy by the disciples of Arminius. It held its sessions from November 13, A.D. 1618, to May 9, A.D. 1619. It consisted of pastors, elders and theological professors from the churches of Holland, and deputies from the churches of England, Scotland, Hesse, Bremen, the Palatinate and Switzerland; the French delegates having been prevented from being present by order of their king. The Canons of this Synod were received by all the Reformed churches as a true, accurate and eminently authoritative exhibition of the Calvinistic System of Theology. They constitute, in connection with the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the doctrinal Confession of the Reformed Church of Holland, and of the [Dutch] Reformed Church of America.

The Confession and Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly. A short account of the origin and constitution of this Assembly, and of the production and reception of its doctrinal deliverances, is presented in the next chapter. This is the common doctrinal standard of all the Presbyterian churches in the world of English and Scotch derivation. It is also of all Creeds the one most highly approved by all the bodies of Congregationalists in England and America. *The Congregational Convention* called by Cromwell to meet at Savoy, in London, A.D. 1658, declared their approval of the doctrinal part of the Confession and Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly, and conformed their own deliverance, the Savoy Confession, very nearly to it. Indeed, “the difference between these two Confessions is so very small, that the modern Independents have in a manner laid aside the use of it (Savoy Conf.) in their families, and agreed with the Presbyterians in the use of the Assembly’s Catechisms.”^[3] All the Assemblies convened in New England for the purpose of settling the doctrinal basis of their churches have either endorsed or explicitly adopted this Confession and these Catechisms as accurate expositions of their own faith. This was done by the Synod which met at

Cambridge, Massachusetts, June, 1647, and again August, 1648, and prepared the Cambridge Platform. And again by the Synod which sat in Boston, September, 1679, and May, 1680, and produced the Boston Confession. And again by the Synod which met at Saybrook, Connecticut, 1708, and produced the Saybrook Platform.^[4]

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Assembly's Digest, p. 11.

[2] Shedd's *History of Christian Doctrine*.

[3] Neal: *Puritans*, II. 178.

[4] Shedd's *History of Christian Doctrine*.