

A History of the Ancient Creedal Texts Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian

Once taken for granted in a world that was largely Christian, the so-called ecumenical Creeds—the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian—today find themselves pushed increasingly into the foreground of a postmodern world for at least two reasons. First, they have become increasingly important because of the need to define the boundaries of historical Christianity in the face of numerous attempts to redefine Christianity in the light of ancient Gnosticism and revisionist versions of Christianity. However some may wish to revise the picture of early Christianity, the creeds define historically the faith as Christians have confessed it from its earliest centuries on. They embody the constituent components of the church's confession of Christ. Second, in a world of thirty thousand Christian denominations, the creeds set forth what all Christians have held in common throughout history. While each denomination or church body arose in a particular era and thus was shaped by it, they all arose out of a common history in the early church and lay claim to it.¹ In a pluralistic age, it has become increasingly important to stress what it means to be Christian as well as Lutheran. The ecumenical creeds fit the bill well.

The Lutheran church places the three ecumenical creeds first in its collection of confessional statements. Historically, the Apostles and Athanasian Creeds belong properly to the church's tradition in the West. Of the three, the Nicene Creed is the truly ecumenical creed acknowledged by the Eastern and Western church alike. But in the sixteenth century, all three were considered ecumenical in the West. The Lutheran Confessions themselves demonstrate that they give more than lip service to them. From the outset, in Article I, the Augsburg Confession grounds its confession of catholicity in its adherence to the faith of Nicaea. The Creeds also shape the contours of the faith set forth in the Lutheran Confessions. Augsburg Confession Article III uses the wording of the Apostles Creed, from which it draws out the soteriological implications for believers. Likewise, in part 1 of the Smalcald articles, Luther also draws on the Apostles Creed. Both of his catechisms expound this Creed. The first article of the Formula of Concord—on original sin—uses it as the rule by which it rejects Flacius' conclusions. The confessions also draw on language of the Athanasian Creed when speaking of the Trinity in Augsburg Confession Article I and Smalcald Articles, part I. Finally, the "Binding Summary" of the Formula points to the creeds as the pattern that they themselves wish to emulate when resolving the controversies of their own day.

Lutherans employ both a historical and a canonical interpretation of the Creeds.² They need to be read as documents that stand on their own within a particular historical context. Thus, for example, when considering the Nicene Creed attention must be given to the ecumenical councils in which the Christology of Nicaea was expounded and expanded. These councils provide something of the church's interpretation of the Nicene Creed and show its theological trajectory. At the same time, as documents that are gathered into a collection of other confessional writings such as the Book of Concord, they are seen to stand alongside and cohere with the church's subsequent theological confessions.

The Wittenberg Reformers found in the credal tradition of the Western medieval church a foundational form for the confession of the message of Scripture. In their formal identification of who and what they understood their churches to be, the princes who sponsored the publication of the Book of Concord wished only to repeat and apply to their own time the teaching of Scripture as "briefly summarized in the time-honored ancient Symbols; teaching that was recognized as that ancient, united consensus believed in by the universal, orthodox churches of Christ and fought for and reaffirmed against many heresies and errors."³ Their theologians affirmed as they set forth their "binding summary, basis, rule and guiding principle" for judging all teaching according to God's Word that their confession in the Formula of Concord only repeated "the true Christian teaching as it was correctly and soundly understood [and] summarized on the basis of God's Word in short articles or chief parts" formulated in the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian, "the three ecumenical creeds."⁴ Indeed, the authors of the Formula were only following the example of Philip Melancthon, who had based the Augsburg Confession upon the Nicene faith⁵ and placed lectures on the Nicene Creed into the Wittenberg curriculum in 1545/1546.⁶ When Caspar Cruciger died while lecturing on the Creed, Melancthon assumed the task. His lectures on the second and third articles, published a quarter century later, in 1574, began with the topic *De gratia et de iustificatione* (on "who for us human creatures and for our salvation descended from heaven"). In addition to the wide-ranging comments on faith and the good works that flow from it, Melancthon treated the church and the sacraments in detail under the third article of the Creed.⁷ The Creed provided him with a firm basis for the exposition of the heart of biblical teaching.

Luther offered commentary on the Apostles Creed in his catechisms and also in his treatise of 1538 on the Apostles and Athanasian Creeds and the *Te Deum Laudamus*, apparently assuming the Nicene Creed, which is printed at the end of the treatise, as the basis for the others.⁸ Those who composed catechisms or catechetical sermons followed in his path, with often extensive proclamation of the credal faith.⁹ Two Wittenberg disciples composed devotional treatises on the Creed or parts of it.¹⁰ Two of their fellow students issued series of sermons specifically on the Creed.¹¹ Amidst the sacramental and Christological controversies of the 1570s, Nikolaus Selnecker found the texts of all three ecumenical creeds as a

suitable basis for a cultivation of careful consideration of the points under dispute. This effort grew out of his instruction of young people in Luther's catechism, he told his readers.¹² A decade later Johann Freder, rector of the University of Rostock and a student of David Chytraeus, used Chytraeus's lectures to defend the Christology of the Formula of Concord in the form of an exposition of the second article of the Apostles Creed.¹³ The ancient creeds were thus deeply embedded in the thinking of Luther, Melancthon, and all who taught and confessed the ancient, biblical Christian faith in their train.

The three creeds reflect very different historical developments that coincide with their respective purposes. The Apostles Creed developed as a baptismal creed for teaching the faith to catechumens and for liturgical use in the baptismal rite. The Nicene Creed represents a conciliar creed (though based on a baptismal creed and subsequently used as one). It was formulated in order to define the faith over and against the Arian heresy. The Athanasian Creed's history is shrouded in more mystery but appears to have served primarily as a summary of the faith for teaching purposes.

The Apostles Creed

To this day the Apostles Creed remains the baptismal and catechetical creed used in most Lutheran congregations, in large part due to the continued use and importance of Luther's Small Catechism.¹⁴ It is thus one of the first pieces of Christian literature that a child or newly converted adult learns. Apart from the Lord's Prayer, there is perhaps no set of words that the church uses more frequently. For most Lutheran churches it is also used on a regular basis in non-communion services and in catechetical services. As such, it provides perhaps one of the most important summaries of the faith for many Christians.

The Apostles Creed is at one and the same time the church's oldest creed and newest creed.¹⁵ What we today refer to as the Apostles Creed was formulated over a period of five centuries (between the third and eighth centuries). We can point to a definitive and relatively fixed text only from the ninth century to the present. Its history can be divided roughly into two periods. The first involves the formulation of early forms of the Apostles Creed that are represented by the baptismal creed of the Roman church (referred to as the Old Roman Creed) and its variants that appear from the third to the eighth centuries. The second period of its history extends from the ninth century forward, a time when scholars can speak of a definitive and fixed text of this Creed (scholars usually refer to this as the *textus receptus*, the "received text") that came to be used widely within the Western church.

The Old Roman Creed

The Apostles Creed can trace its genesis back to the era of the New Testament. Already there we see the impulse for Christians to confess their faith. Simple and concise confessions of Jesus can be found on the pages of the New Testament. They often took the form of what scholars call Christological acclamations. The most

common of these are easily recognizable: “Jesus is Lord,” “Jesus is the Christ,” and “Jesus is the Son of God.”¹⁶ Some think that they took the form of personal confessions of the faith by which one announced his or her allegiance to Christ. As acclamations they also offered him praise and adoration.

Alongside these personal confessions of faith and Christological acclamations, slightly longer confessional formulaic statements—sometimes called “Christological sequences” or Christological “catch-phrases”—arose at the beginning of the second century. These were summaries of Christ’s life and often were formulated to address errors regarding the identity and story of Jesus. One such example is provided by Ignatius of Antioch: “For our God Jesus Christ was conceived by Mary according to God’s plan, of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit; who was born and was baptized that by his passion He might cleanse water.”¹⁷ In general, these recounted key moments in the life of Jesus.¹⁸ In some cases they were composed to address Docetist¹⁹ errors that brought into question the reality of Jesus’ human existence. This appears to have been the case with Ignatius’ formula. Already at the end of the first century, the Apostle John provided a few statements to be used as something of a litmus test. “Whoever says that Jesus has not come in the flesh is not from us” (1 John 4:2-3).

Also in the second century, another form of confessional statement began to grow in popularity, namely, the “rule of faith” (Irenaeus) or the “canon of truth” (Tertullian).²⁰ In form, rules of faith utilized the Christological formulas or stereotypical narratives but adapted them with details of different events to refute gnostic teachings. These Christological formulas were at times combined with statements that included a confession of God as the creator. While the specific wording may vary, the underlying pattern remained fairly constant. It confesses Christ by mentioning some of the key events in his biography, notably his birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming. Consider a rule of faith quoted by Irenaeus (d. ca. 200) as an example. He notes that Christians believe in:

One God, the maker of heaven and earth and of all the things that are in them, through Christ Jesus the Son of God,
 who because of his outstanding love toward his creation
 endured the birth from the virgin, uniting in himself man to God,
 and suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 and rose again,
 and was taken up in splendor,
 and will come again in glory,
 the savior of those who are saved
 and the judge of those who are judged. (Adv. haer. 3, 4, 2)

With statements like these, Irenaeus argued that the Gnostics misread the Scriptures and assembled them in the wrong way.²¹ Despite differences in wording between the various rules of faith, the church fathers maintained that they set forth one and

the same faith across the church. By the fourth century synodal and conciliar creeds took over the function that the *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”) served as touchstones of orthodoxy (that is, the Nicene Creed).

Sometime between 150 and 250 in Rome, Christological sequences were inserted into the trinitarian formula used for Christian baptisms, thus giving rise to the Apostles Creed (in the form of the Old Roman Creed). Liuwe Westra suggests that such a fusion of these two elements marks the birth of the Apostles Creed even though the precise wording of that first formula cannot be determined. A set of baptismal questions found in the *collectio Veronensis*, later Western forms of the Creed, and manuscripts containing the Old Roman Creed all point to an original form of the Creed that could be designated proto-R (Roman Creed), which appeared sometime around 250.²² Because the Christological sequence was inserted into the trinitarian baptismal formula, Westra argues that the “Apostles Creed as we meet it in Rome and the rest of the Western church” bears the character of a liturgical text.²³ This text comes down to us both in the form of questions and answers (the interrogatory creed) and in the form of a straightforward statement of the faith (the declaratory creed).²⁴

The interrogatory form of the Creed was used within the baptismal rite itself.²⁵ There the person being baptized was asked questions, beginning with, “do you believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth?” To each question, the baptizand responded, “Yes, I believe,” at which point he or she was submerged under the water.²⁶ In the early twentieth century, a set of baptismal questions resembling the Old Roman Creed and found in the *collectio Veronensis* came to be associated with the Roman presbyter Hippolytus (175–235) and the so-called “Apostolic Tradition” (*traditio apostolica*), which was thought to be his. Today, Hippolytan scholars question the authenticity of the so-called *traditio apostolica* within this collection and are less certain about both its date and its origin. More likely, the baptismal questions found in the *collectio Veronensis* belong to the fifth century and may represent material that goes back to the last quarter of the fourth century.²⁷ The wording of those baptismal questions reads as follows:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty?
 Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God,
 who was born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary,
 who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died,
 and rose again on the third day living from the dead,
 and ascended into the heavens,
 and sits on the right hand of the Father,
 and will come to judge the living and the dead?
 Do you believe in the Holy Spirit,
 in the holy Church,
 and the resurrection of the flesh?

This set of baptismal questions comes close to the text of the Old Roman Creed itself.²⁸ In fact, Westra sees the text of these questions as a sister to the Old Roman Creed although the wording of the questions comes very close to that of the declaratory form of the Old Roman Creed. There are minor differences, for example, the questions do not mention “only” (as “his only Son”) or the “remission of sins” (third article).

The declaratory form of the creed became most frequently associated with the instruction of catechumens. It came to be used as part of a rite known as the *traditio symboli* (literally, “handing down of the symbol,” the creed) and *redditio symboli* (“repetition of the symbol”) late in the Lenten season just prior to Easter. These two rites usually culminated three years of instruction for catechumens in the catechumenate and prepared them for baptism. The *traditio* took place when the bishop spoke the Creed to the catechumens. He accompanied this with an exhortation for the catechumen to learn it by heart. The catechumens in turn were expected to recite it during the *redditio*. In this way those to be baptized gave public testimony to their faith in Christ and the teachings of the gospel. On these occasions a sermon on the Creed was delivered with an explanation of several of its articles.²⁹

The existence of this declaratory creed that scholars call the Old Roman Creed is “vouchsafed by Rufinus (somewhat Ambrose and Augustine) in its outline and content, by several anonymous manuscripts in its wording, and a fourth-century date by Marcellus of Ancyra.”³⁰ The Old Roman Creed reads as follows:³¹

I believe in God the Father almighty;
 and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
 who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
 who under Pontius Pilate was crucified, and buried,
 on the third day rose again from the dead,
 ascended to the heaven,
 sits at the right hand of the Father,
 whence he will come to judge the living and the dead;
 and in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy Church,
 the remission of sins,
 the resurrection of the flesh.³²

As can be seen, the Old Roman Creed closely resembles the creedal questions of the “apostolic tradition.” Because of their different purposes the two texts take on different forms, most notably, in their opening. All the forms of Old Roman Creed begin with “Credo” (“I believe”), whereas the interrogatory form begins with “Credis” (“do you believe?”).

Scholars have debated whether the interrogatory form of the creed or the declaratory form of the creed came first and thus which should be regarded as original.³³ The issue of which came first depends in part upon whether or not the fusion

of the trinitarian and Christological formulae that gave rise to the Apostles Creed took place before or after the *traditio* and *redditio symboli* became an established practice.³⁴ Kelly viewed them as interchangeable manifestations of the same phenomenon but generally saw the questions coming first.³⁵ Westra acknowledges that the questions probably came first, since baptisms go back to the days of the New Testament. Yet he suggests that the wording of the questions themselves seemed to “follow the fluctuations in wording” of declaratory creeds. Westra holds that, rather than trying to identify which came first, it might be best “to maintain that the Apostles Creed may be found both as a declarative creed and in the guise of baptismal questions.”³⁶

Augustine, Ambrose, and Rufinus all testify that the Apostles Creed—whether in its interrogatory or declaratory form—arose in Rome. Thus, the Apostles Creed and the Eastern baptismal creeds should be considered two different traditions. More importantly, the church fathers believed that the Creed itself traced its origin back to the apostles themselves. Ambrose of Milan (340–397) appears to be the first to ascribe the Creed’s authorship to the apostles toward the end of the fourth century.³⁷ The most famous account of its authorship and its composition is given by Rufinus, a priest in Aquileia. In a commentary on the Apostles Creed in 404, he stated that upon Christ’s resurrection each apostle took turns in contributing a phrase to the creed.³⁸ Accordingly, in the West the Creed came to be divided into twelve articles corresponding to the twelve apostles.

The Apostles Creed (the Old Roman Creed and its variants) spread throughout the Western church in the third and fourth centuries. Most scholars point out that this does not mean that there yet existed a standard or fixed text of the creed that was used universally throughout the church. Instead, a number of texts continue to show some variety in both wording and content.

Marcellus of Ancyra quotes the text of a Greek creed from 340 that resembles the Old Roman Creed. Marcellus was an ardent advocate of the Nicene faith who sometimes overstated his position in such a way that his opponents could accuse him of Sabellianism, or modalism. In order to defend himself, Marcellus wrote to Pope Julius I in Rome and offered a creed to which he adhered as evidence of his orthodoxy. In his commentary on the Apostles Creed, Rufinus referred to the Creed used in the Aquileian church and pointed out where it differed slightly from the Creed used in the church at Rome in both wording and content. Augustine of Hippo also quoted two different forms of the Creed. One appears to be from the *redditio symboli* that was used at Milan when he was baptized, whereas the other appears to be the creed that he used for the *traditio symboli* at Hippo after becoming bishop there.³⁹

As the Creed spread across the Western church, it developed a number of regional types or variants from the fourth through the eighth centuries: “no two forms of the Creed from this period are exactly identical.”⁴⁰ These regional forms of the Apostles Creed reveal slight differences in both content and wording. Some

changes were confined to certain regions while other changes migrated from one region to another. Westra hypothesizes that more substantial changes tended to find their way across different regions whereas minor changes were confined to a locale. While that generally proved to be true, he discovered that those minor changes that were Roman in origin tended to find their way into the rest of the church.⁴¹

Reactions to changes in the Creed took three forms. First, some expressed strong disapproval to making any changes. When Ambrose delivered the creed to catechumens in the rite of the *traditio symboli*, he exhorted them to memorize it word for word and not change a single word. Second, some defended the changes as necessary for dogmatic and pastoral reasons, or liturgical purposes (for example, Latin style that varied from place to place). Third, others remained silent on the matter. For example, Augustine seems more oblivious to the differences in wording of the Creed in his day and hardly ever mentioned them. His attitude tended to be characteristic of the early church at large.⁴² Despite the variants the general assumption seems to be that they embody one and the same confession of the faith.

After the fourth century the Nicene Creed supplanted the Old Roman Creed in Rome as the baptismal creed of choice. But the latter continued to be used as the baptismal creed in some areas of the Western church and within the monasteries of western Europe for meditation and instruction within the daily offices of prayer. The Apostles Creed appeared in the eighth century in the form that we now use, and by the ninth and tenth centuries it again returned to its place within the baptismal liturgy at Rome.

The Textus Receptus of the Apostles Creed

The final form of the Apostles Creed shifts attention from Rome to Western Europe. By the ninth century many changes had taken place throughout the world. The Islamic empire had expanded considerably. Under Mohammed it had encompassed nearly the entire Saudi Arabian peninsula (612–632). It then expanded westward through the Middle East, Egypt, and Libya under the Rightly Guided Caliphate (635–661). Finally, it pushed across the rest of northern Africa and into the Iberian peninsula (Portugal and Spain) under the leadership of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750). By 711 the Islamic Moors conquered the Visigoths in Spain and brought the Iberian peninsula under Islamic rule. They moved across the Pyrenees Mountains but were defeated by the Franks under Charles Martel in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers.

One of those affected by the Islamic push eastward into Europe was Pirminius, a Benedictine monk. In 718 the Saracens, under El-Hurr, pushed across the Pyrenees Mountains and took Narbonne in 720.⁴³ They especially targeted the churches (“with their furnishings and treasure”) and their clergy. Pirminius might have been one of those forced to flee for his life from Gaul and to begin a new life in southern Germany. There he established and became the first abbot of the monastery at Reichenau. From there Christian missionary activity spread throughout southwest Germany, where Pirminius helped to establish numerous monasteries.⁴⁴

Sometime between 710 and 724, the *De Singulis Libris Canonicis Scarapsus* (*Excerpt from Individual Canonical Books*) attributed to Pirminius appeared,⁴⁵ containing excerpts from the Scriptures and church fathers. It was intended to serve as a manual of preaching for the missionary monks. The *Excerpt* provides a text of the Apostles Creed that is virtually identical with the one that came to be used universally within the Western church to the present day. The treatise quoted the Apostles Creed on three separate occasions within the work. The first chapter retold the story of how the apostles composed the Creed (the story that goes back to Rufinus). The second chapter reminded the monks of their baptisms, the events that included their renunciation of the devil, and their confession of the faith. This wording has come to be known as the *textus receptus* of the Creed, and “Pirminius” is the “first literary witness” to its existence.⁴⁶

Kelly argues that this text should not be regarded as of Roman origin or redaction. He argues that the author probably did not take this creed from Rome but “used the form of creed with which he had grown up in his native land” somewhere in the Visigothic region of France (Septimania) around the region of Narbonne. Other creeds virtually identical with the *textus receptus* began to appear in southern Gaul from the fifth century forward. Perhaps most importantly, a creed very similar to the *textus receptus* is found in the writings of Caesarius of Arles (542).⁴⁷ Kelly suggests that the Creed probably attained its present shape sometime in the seventh century. As a result, he argues that the present text of the Apostles Creed (the *textus receptus*) should be regarded as a Gallican and not a Roman redaction.

Scholars have paid significant attention to the question of how the *textus receptus* of the Apostles Creed came to replace the Nicene Creed as the standard baptismal text within the West in general and in Rome in particular. It appears to have occurred in two stages. First it became used almost exclusively in baptism throughout France and Germany. From there it eventually worked its way back to Rome.

The first period or stage occurred with the effort to promote Roman liturgical practices among the French and German churches after Pippin, king of the Franks (and Charlemagne’s father), and Pope Stephen II agreed in 754 to bring liturgical uniformity into their realms. When Charlemagne became king of the Franks in 768 (and then king of the Romans in 800), he continued the program begun under Pippin of cultural, liturgical, and educational reform. It had centered on the celebration of the mass and the administration of the sacraments. As part of that program of reform, Charlemagne worked from 811 to 813 to establish uniformity in the baptismal service and foster the use of the baptismal creed as the instrument for instruction of catechumens as part of his education program. In a letter to all the metropolitans in his realm, he asked for information regarding what was being taught to priests and people through the texts of the baptismal rite, the scrutiny, and the creed. The results must have revealed a great deal of diversity in liturgical practices, prompting Charlemagne in 813 to insist that the Roman rite become the standard throughout the church.⁴⁸

Charlemagne's reform program apparently did not directly impact the use of the Creed. There was no attempt to replace *textus receptus* of the Apostles Creed with the Nicene Creed that was currently used in the Roman rite of the *treditio* and *redditio*. This is not to say Charlemagne was not concerned about the baptismal creed.⁴⁹ He insisted that the same creed be used by all the clergy within his realm.⁵⁰ The choice of creed fell upon the *textus receptus* of the Apostles Creed, which was "a native to Septimania in S.W. France, was in current use at Arles," and had been adopted in many of the German lands. The push for uniformity in the baptismal rite and the use of this creed as an educational instrument probably hastened its adoption throughout the West, since it "had already achieved a wide measure of diffusion and popularity." By the ninth century the *textus receptus* "began to enjoy practical monopoly in Western Europe."⁵¹

This leads to the question of the replacement by the Apostles Creed of the Nicene Creed for the *treditio* rite in Rome, in use there since at least the sixth century.⁵² During a period that extended from the restoration of the empire under Otto I the Great in 962 to the beginning of the reign of Pope Gregory VII (1073), the church in Rome was characterized by corruption among the clergy and decay in its liturgical practices. When Otto I (912–973) became emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 962, he set out to restore ecclesiastical standards for clergy within the church and so arranged for many German ecclesiastics to help with the process of reform in Rome. They brought with them the liturgical reforms that had been taking place in Western Europe since the days of Charlemagne. Thus, their Franco-German influence brought about a "Gallicanization" of the Roman liturgy, including the replacement of the Nicene Creed with the Apostles Creed.⁵³

A further step in the direction of Rome's eventual adoption of the *textus receptus* of the Apostles Creed occurred when the great grandson of Otto I, Pope Gregory V (972–999), became the first German pope in 996. He quickly granted special privileges to the abbey of Reichenau (in 998) and requested that the liturgical works of Reichenau be sent to Rome periodically (usually with the ordination of new abbots). "The baptismal orders which travelled south to the papal palace from their scriptorium certainly contained the creed T [*textus receptus*] which had descended to them from their refugee founder."⁵⁴ At some point—the process is somewhat obscure—the *textus receptus* came to be considered the official form of the Apostles Creed within the Roman rite itself.⁵⁵ The Franco-German church gave back to Rome the rule of faith that it had first produced.⁵⁶

Summary

The Apostles Creed conveys the essentials of the Christian faith in a straightforward, down-to-earth manner that is at once simple, concise, and easy to grasp. It does so with the language of the Scriptures themselves. It is perhaps not surprising then that the Apostles Creed has served so well as the creed of choice both for teaching new Christians the basics of the faith and for use in the baptismal rite

when new Christians personally confess their faith in the Jesus of Scripture. Its stature for these purposes becomes enhanced with Luther's classic expositions of the Creed in the Small and Large Catechisms.

The Nicene Creed

Most who recite the Nicene Creed every Sunday may not realize either how important it is or how revolutionary it was for the confession of Jesus Christ within the Christian church. The theological controversy sparked by the Alexandrian presbyter Arius brought to a head nearly three centuries of theological debates and controversies over the confession of Christ. The Nicene Creed had to come to terms with what to many appeared to be two conflicting principles, namely, a monotheistic principle (there is only one God) and a Christological principle (the Son is fully God in the same way that the Father is fully God).⁵⁷

From the beginning, Christians adhered to the monotheistic faith they had inherited from Israel. As Christians moved out into the Greco-Roman world, they found it necessary to defend their monotheistic faith when the wider culture pointed out what seemed to be contradictions between what their confession and practice. Pliny, Roman governor of Bithynia, reported that when Christians met on a fixed day at dawn, they gathered to "recite a hymn to Christ as to a god."⁵⁸ This raised the question of why Christians would not worship the traditional gods when they themselves venerated Jesus as a god. Rome, after all, had no difficulty in incorporating foreign gods into its pantheon alongside the native gods.⁵⁹ How did Christians reconcile these two theological convictions?

Prior to Nicaea, the monotheistic principle was taken for granted as being non-negotiable. The one God was most often identified in the New Testament with the Father of Jesus (1 Cor. 8:6). But as the church took its confession of one God into a Hellenistic culture, it had to contend with the filtering of the biblical confession of one God through philosophical understandings of the nature of God. For example, what does it mean to say that God is "one"? That God is a monad? A singularity? Similarly, it was virtually axiomatic for everyone that God does not suffer. God is perfect and hence immutable. Change in God would imply either movement toward perfection or away from perfection. Suffering would be a form of change. And yet Christ suffered and died. How can he be God in the way that the Father is?

In the attempt to defend their monotheistic confession, various church fathers articulated the Son's relation to the Father in a way that (at least to later generations) seemed to compromise either the full deity of the Son or the personhood of the Son. The Apologists (Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Theophilus, bishop of Antioch) in the second century argued that the Logos ("thought" or "reason") within God became the Son when the Father sent him forth "in creative speech" according to Genesis.⁶⁰ The Adoptionists (Theodotus, Paul of Samasota) in the late second and early third centuries, contended that the Spirit descended on the man Jesus and adopted or empowered him as Son of God.⁶¹ The Subordinationists (Tertullian and

Origen) in the third century tended to affirm that the Son always existed with the Father but in a way that implied a derived and hence subordinate deity of the Son (as the spring from which a stream flows).⁶² The Modalists (Praxeas, Sabellius) in the third century contended that one God played three different roles in the three-act play of salvation. All of this culminated with the controversy sparked by Arius. He argued that the Son was a creature, indeed the first and most powerful of all God's creatures, but still a creature.

Nicaea marks the critical turning point in the discussion. The bishops at Nicaea refused to compromise the Christological principle, that is, the full deity of the Son of God. If that means that one must redefine what it means to be monotheistic, then so be it. The church subsequently needed to interpret the oneness of God so as to embrace plurality in a biblical way.⁶³ No longer was the confession of God's oneness understood to mean that God is a monad or mathematical singularity. Hilary of Poitiers put it well, "Though he is one, he is not solitary."⁶⁴ As a result of the Nicene confession, the two other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, do not regard Christians as monotheists. Instead, they see Christians as having a society or association of gods.

The tensions between the monotheistic and Christological principles can be illustrated by the challenge of interpreting and reconciling two statements of Jesus from the Gospel of John: "The Father is greater than I" (14:28) and "The Father and I are one" (10:30). Should we consider the first as the clear and non-negotiable passage, how might we interpret the second in light of it? One possibility is, "The Father and I are one in will and purpose." But if we consider the passage, "the Father and I are one" the clearer—understanding it to affirm the equality of the Father and the Son in deity—then how does one interpret the other passage, "the Father is greater than I"? The orthodox answer referred it to his human nature. The Nicene Creed points in that direction. Thus, the Athanasian Creed later confessed that the Son is "equal to the Father with respect to his deity; less than the Father with respect to his humanity."

The Controversy Erupts

The Arian controversy became a public issue in 318 and 319 when the elderly Arius preached a series of sermons in Alexandria.⁶⁵ In them he expounded on the relationship of the Father and the Son. Born in Libya (256), Arius had been trained in Antioch under Lucian, a well-respected exegete and theologian, and was serving the fairly well-to-do and "fashionable church Baucalis,"⁶⁶ a congregation in in the port district of Alexandria. Reports describe Arius as "tall, austere, ascetically dressed, grim of countenance, urbane in manner."⁶⁷ He was a strong monotheist, but the way he spoke of the status and nature of the Son in sermons or lectures aroused the concerns of Alexander, Arius's bishop, and prompted him to pursue further discussion of the positions put forward by Arius.

To that end Alexander arranged for a public discussion or debate of Arius's views with a larger group of bishops and theologians. In those discussion Arius elaborated

on his views and argued for the “monarchy” of the Father in such a way that he spoke of the Son as a creature. Thus, there was a time when he did not exist—prior to the Father begetting him, an event that took place before the creation of the universe itself. Others countered Arius by pointing out that his position meant that the Son was not truly God. Instead, Arius’s opponents insisted that the Son was of one being with God. Agreeing with the latter, Alexander called upon Arius to stop promulgating his views. Arius responded by charging that Alexander was promoting Sabellianism.⁶⁸

The dispute soon became a full-fledged controversy that spilled beyond the borders of Alexandria. In 320 Alexander convened a synod of bishops from Egypt and Libya (numbering about one hundred). They agreed with Alexander’s excommunication of Arius and voted to send him into exile. Arius rejected the action of the synod and sought sanctuary with Eusebius of Caesarea. There he became a lightning rod as various bishops in Palestine rallied to his side while other bishops in Antioch and Jerusalem opposed him. Arius found an especially strong supporter in Eusebius of Nicomedia (across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, modern day Istanbul), who had been a fellow student of Arius in Antioch. In the meantime Alexander sent letters to seventy bishops, informing them of Arius’s excommunication and soliciting from them letters of communion that effectively excommunicated Arius throughout the church.⁶⁹ From Nicomedia, Arius enlisted the support of an increasing number of bishops who in turn held their own synod, in which they excommunicated Alexander.⁷⁰

Within three to four years, the Arian controversy had spread throughout much of the church in the East. The matter caught the attention of Emperor Constantine, who had only recently become emperor of the Eastern empire in 324 by defeating the anti-Christian emperor of the East, Licinius. The theological controversy had become a threat to public peace and order as demonstrators took to the streets and the people deposed bishops and installed replacements. To quash the controversy, the emperor dispatched his sixty-seven year old ecclesiastical advisor, Ossius, bishop of Cordoba (Spain), to Alexandria with letters in which Constantine reprimanded Alexander and Arius for debating such matters and allowing their dispute to become matters of public disturbances. He urged them to reconcile.⁷¹

When that initial attempt to resolve the controversy failed, Constantine and his advisors decided to convene a general council of the church in order to restore unity within the church. In doing so, the emperor carried out the traditional role of a Roman emperor as the religious leader of his people. The council was to take place in Nicaea, a town in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Prior to the council, Ossius attended a synod of fifty-nine bishops in Antioch, where he elicited the adoption of a statement of faith or creed.⁷² Overall, the statement sided with Alexander and rejected the notion that the Son came “from what was not.” Also, prior to the council, Ossius appears to have met with Alexander and came to agreement on the formula that the Son was “consubstantial with the Father,”⁷³ a point with which the council later concurred.

The Council of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea convened in the early summer of 325. Due to distances and difficulties of travel, only a few bishops from Europe made the trip. As a result, those attending the council came primarily from churches bordering the Mediterranean Sea.⁷⁴ The prominent bishops who opposed Arius included Alexander of Alexandria, Eustathius of Antioch, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Macarius of Jerusalem. The prominent bishops who supported Arius included Eusebius of Casarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicaea, and Maris of Chalcedon. Pope Sylvester of Rome had asked to be excused from the council on account of his advanced age but sent personal envoys. Altogether, according to Athanasius (a twenty-five-year old deacon and secretary to Alexander), approximately three hundred bishops were in attendance. In the opening of the council, according to Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*,⁷⁵ the bishops were aligned down each side of a long hall and stood as the emperor, clothed in purple and gold, entered with three members of the imperial family and a few senior advisors. Eusebius describes the emperor as "distinguished by piety and godly fear." Constantine welcomed the bishops and urged them to help restore peace to the church by healing their divisions.⁷⁶

According to Athanasius's *Epistola ad Afros*, the discussions of Arius's views took place in three stages. The first stage entailed a discussion of the catchwords or slogans (for example, the Son "was from what was not") that summarized Arius's teaching that the Son was a creaturely being like other creaturely beings.⁷⁷ Opponents of Arius looked for biblical expressions that stressed the unique status of the Son. The second stage apparently took place when debate ensued about whether or not various biblical expressions provided unequivocal rejections of Arius's teaching. In the third stage the bishops explored the use of more precise and unambiguous phrases such as "from the substance of the Father" and "of one substance with the Father." At this time the proposal to affirm that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father was put forward. Although the term was not found in Scripture and had various shades of meaning, it clearly rejected any hint of creatureliness with respect to the Son. In his *Thalia*, Arius himself had declared that the Son was "not equal to nor, for that matter, *homoousion* with, the Father."

After the Creed was finished and adopted by the bishops, the emperor "stepped in firmly, even brutally, to ensure its acceptance."⁷⁸ When several bishops refused to state their agreement with it, Constantine threatened them with exile. In the end, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicaea, and Maris of Chalcedon along with several others agreed to sign the creed but refused to accept its anathemas. Arius and a few others refused to sign anything and were subsequently sent into exile. The Creed reads:⁷⁹

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 from the Father, only-

begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us human beings and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead;

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, There was [a time when] when he was not, and, before being born He was not, and that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance,⁸⁰ or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.⁸¹

It becomes readily apparent in both its positive or thetic statements as well as their antitheses that the Creed addresses directly the key catchphrases used by Arius and his supporters. In particular, it focuses on stating the meaning that the Son is “begotten of the Father.” If we reformat the second article visually, we can see what it was about theologically and better grasp its focus and emphases.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
 begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father,
through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us human beings and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead.

The creed uses 1 Corinthians 8, “one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things came into being” (italicized text) as a framework. This passage brackets the statements regarding the answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” More specifically, the indented and italicized text simply seeks to expand on what it means to say that the Son is “begotten” of the Father.

The decisions of Nicaea did not end the theological debates swirling around Arius as Constantine had hoped. The different positions taken over Arius’s teachings hardened, and the controversy continued, at times violently, for the next fifty years. During these years bishops were installed and deposed—often by mobs or by the armed might of the authorities. One synod after another met to overturn the decisions of previous councils and produce new creeds. At times it appeared that the supporters of Arius would prevail and at other times that the supporters of the Nicene faith would triumph.⁸²

Several new and influential thinkers arose within the church during this time and became key defenders of the Nicene faith as they further clarified the church's exposition of the Trinity and finally settled the issue. These included among others Athanasius, the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil), and Hilary of Poitiers.

Athanasius, who started out as a deacon and served as secretary for Alexander at the council of Nicaea, became bishop of Alexandria upon Alexander's death in 328. His tenure proved to be tumultuous as Athanasius found himself accused repeatedly of false charges, such as immoral conduct, illegally taxing the Egyptians, tyrannizing bishops, interrupting grain supplies from Alexandria to Constantinople, and even murdering a rebellious priest.⁸³ He found himself exiled to Trier, in Germany, was forced to seek sanctuary in Rome, and fled to safety in the desert. When the council at Milan convened in 355, the emperor, Constantine's son Constantius II, pressured the bishops to depose Athanasius. When the pope, along with Hilary (recently elected bishop of Poitiers) and Ossius of Cordoba (now nearly one hundred years old) objected, they too found themselves in the next year either in exile (Hilary) or under house arrest (Ossius). In 356 Roman legions stormed the church of Theonas where Athanasius was holding a vigil service. During the ensuing melee Athanasius was whisked away into exile among the desert fathers in Egypt.⁸⁴ Altogether, Athanasius spent seventeen of his forty-six years as bishop in exile.⁸⁵

In Athanasius's later years a group of young Cappadocians emerged as strong Nicene supporters and ultimately brought about the acceptance of the Nicene faith in the East. When Athanasius died in 373, leadership passed to Basil, who had become bishop of Caesarea in 370. From a wealthy, deeply pious family, he soon proved himself to be a capable administrator and a top-tier theologian with a commanding personality. From the beginning of his episcopate, Basil worked to forge a theological consensus between East and West. He installed his younger brother Gregory as bishop of Nyssa. Gregory proved to be only an adequate administrator but was a profound thinker and played a prominent role at the Council of Constantinople (381). Basil sent Gregory of Nazianzus to Constantinople to rally support for the faith of Nicaea. There he won renown as a preacher and shepherded a rapidly growing flock.⁸⁶

Together, the Cappadocian theologians brought the Eastern bishops to the faith of Nicaea and its *homoousios* so that the Nicene Creed became the definitive statement of catholic orthodoxy. They accomplished this in part by working out the distinction between *ousia* ("substance") and *hypostasis* ("person") that enabled most of the Eastern bishops to embrace the Nicene Creed and thereby brought about the consolidation of Nicene Orthodoxy that was reaffirmed at the council of Constantinople. While Athanasius tended to see these terms as synonyms, the Cappadocians defined *ousia* as the essence common to the persons and *hypostasis* as referring to that which is proper and distinctive of a person. This Cappadocian solution grounded the distinctive characteristics of each person in its origins:

“begotten” distinguished the Son, “proceeding” the Spirit. The only acceptable formula was one *ousia* and three *hypostases*. The “one Godhead thus exists in three modes of being, three *hypostases*.”⁸⁷

The Creed of Constantinople

When the Eastern emperor Valens died in 378, the Western emperor Gratian appointed his Spanish general Theodosius (379–395) as emperor in the East. Under Theodosius the tide turned.⁸⁸ As a Westerner he was loyal to the Nicene faith, with the result that for first time since 325 emperors from East and West adhered to the Nicene formula. Basil died in 379 before his fiftieth birthday. In 380 Theodosius issued an edict that all who lived according to the religion handed down from Christ through Peter to the Romans should believe “in the one divinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit in equal majesty and holy Trinity.” All who failed to adhere to this were branded heretics and denied the name “catholic.” This became significant for the princes at Augsburg, who argued that they were entitled to their princely rights within the empire as adherents of the Catholic faith, as confessed in the first article of the Augsburg Confession, which affirmed the Nicene Creed.⁸⁹ The churches of Constantinople were taken from the Arians, and Gregory of Nazianzus was installed as the new bishop in the presence of Theodosius.⁹⁰

Theodosius identified his profession of 380 with the Nicene formula. In May 381 Theodosius convened a council that met at the imperial palace in Constantinople to resolve the Arian issue once and for all. The prominent participants of the council included Gregory of Nazianzus (elected president of the council), Basil’s brothers Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste, and Cyril of Jerusalem. For some time, the Council of Constantinople was seen as little more than a regional council of the Eastern church in that it was attended by about 150 bishops, mostly from the East. The Western church did not recognize it as ecumenical for a century or more. For example, Pope Felix (d. 493) recognized only Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon as ecumenical. Not until Pope Hormisdas (d. 523) did the West recognize it as an ecumenical council. Not until 1274 did the Western church recognize the canons of Constantinople. Not until Chalcedon in 451 was the faith set forth by 150 bishops affirmed as the faith of the church.⁹¹

The text of the Creed as we know it comes from Chalcedon. The following was read at the second session of Council of Chalcedon on October 10 and is the text used on September 16, 680, at the eighteenth session of the sixth ecumenical council at Constantinople.

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;
 And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came

into existence, who because of human beings and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there will be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.⁹²

The differences between the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople can be seen most clearly in the second and third articles.

In general, this creed restated the basic assertions of Nicaea. One notably new clause was incorporated into the second article to address a situation that had arisen since 325. The statement, “His kingdom shall have no end” (from Luke 1:33), appears to be directed against Marcellus of Ancyra (d. 374), one of the staunchest defenders of the Nicene *homoousios*. Some, however, suspected him of Sabellianism. He and later his disciples had taught that the Word had become incarnate for the purpose of redemption but would return all things to the Father. Thus, his kingdom would end with the final judgment. This implied that the Logos was something of a “transient projection” of the Father for the purpose of the incarnation.⁹³ Once he accomplished the task of salvation, he would return all things to the Father and again become what he had been from all eternity, immanent in the Father. Such a position horrified many. Cyril of Jerusalem warned, “If ever you hear anyone saying that there is an end to the kingship of Christ, hate the heresy.”⁹⁴

In addition to Marcellus, the creed appears to take aim at the teachings of Apollinaris, even though the creed itself makes no explicit statement specifically regarding Apollinaris’s teaching. The first canon of the Council of Constantinople did, however, anathematize the followers of Apollinaris (b. 310), who had served as bishop of Laodicea (modern day Latakia) in Syria from 361–390. His views on Christology began attracting attention after 362. By 375 he had broken with orthodoxy. Apollinaris and his followers denied that the Son assumed a genuine human nature by stating that the Word took the role of the rational soul in Jesus and that he brought with him a flesh that he had constructed in heaven rather than from Mary,⁹⁵ who merely served as the “canal” through whom the Word passed.⁹⁶ His teachings were condemned in several councils leading up to Constantinople.⁹⁷

The most obvious difference between the Creed of Constantinople and the Creed of Nicaea is readily seen in the much-expanded third article. Kelly notes that it was not uncommon for Eastern baptismal creeds to include mention of the

catholic church, baptism, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. But its affirmation of the deity of the Spirit is quite striking. Herein lies the distinctive and lasting theological contribution of the Council of Constantinople. In the struggle to affirm the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, an obvious next question would be, "What about the Spirit as well?" The Arians had apparently considered the matter and were prepared to speak also of the creatureliness of the Spirit. But such assertions remained in the background of the early fourth century discussion of the *homoousios* of the Son. By the second half of the fourth century, this issue burst into the open and became a hotly debated issue. Those who refused to speak of the Spirit as consubstantial with the Father came to be known as Pneumatomachians, or "spirit-fighters."⁹⁸

The Council of Constantinople had to address head-on the issue of the Spirit's deity. While Basil did not want to add to the Nicene faith regarding the Son, he recognized that more needed to be said about the Spirit. In its first canon the Council of Constantinople not only anathematized the Pneumatomachians; it affirmed the full consubstantiality of the Spirit as well as the distinctive hypostasis of the Spirit. But apparently when it came time to approve the Creed, the emperor Theodosius asked for a more conciliatory tone to be struck. Therefore, the Creed does not use the more provocative *homoousios* language and state that the Spirit is consubstantial with the Father. Instead, it utilizes phrases from Scripture laid out in Basil's book *On the Holy Spirit*,⁹⁹ from which one can draw no other conclusion than that the Spirit is fully God.¹⁰⁰ Young concludes, "Paying attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit led to the formulation of a truly Trinitarian concept of God."¹⁰¹

The Text

The Creed included in the Book of Concord is, properly speaking, the Creed of Constantinople and not the Creed of Nicaea. The Creed of Constantinople is not merely a modified version of the Creed of Nicaea. They are two different texts.¹⁰² The origins and composition of the second text are not entirely clear. It seems that the bishops at the Council of Constantinople did not write a new creed from scratch during the council itself but instead used an already existing baptismal creed that was used in or around Jerusalem or Antioch in the 370s. Kelly suggests that the style of the Creed, "its graceful balance and smooth flow, convey the impression of a liturgical peace which has emerged naturally in the life and worship of the Christian community rather than of a conciliar artifact."¹⁰³ To this creed those attending the council made a few alterations to meet their particular needs.

When the council in Constantinople adopted its confession of the faith, it did not see itself as propagating a new creed. Davis notes, "In the minds of the fathers of Constantinople, they were not thereby replacing the old sacrosanct Nicene Creed but rather ratifying the Nicene faith in the shape of the Creed of Constantinople."¹⁰⁴ Kelly comments, "that it should do this by adopting what was really a different formula from that of Nicaea may appear paradoxical to us, until we recall that at this

stage importance attached to the Nicene teaching rather than to the literal wording of N [Nicene Creed].”¹⁰⁵ Such an approach continued for some time. The church tended to stress the content of teaching of Nicaea more than the specific wording of a particular formulary or text, which allowed for various creeds to be considered as “the faith of Nicaea.”

The specific text of the creed endorsed at Constantinople fell into some obscurity between 381 and 451, partly because it was the view of many bishops that Constantinople was a regional council and not an ecumenical council,¹⁰⁶ partly because of the influence of Cyril of Alexandria. He was perhaps suspicious of new creeds, always cited the Nicene Creed only in its original, literal, and pure form, and claimed that no other creed could claim equality with it. Under his influence the council of Ephesus (431) clearly distinguished the Creed of Nicaea from the Creed of Constantinople. It was due to him “more than to anyone else that the obscurity of C[onstantinople] is due.” In spite of Cyril’s approach, “the habit of designating any orthodox formula constructed on Nicene principles as ‘the faith of Nicaea’ was never eradicated.”¹⁰⁷

The present text of the Creed of Constantinople first appeared in 451 at the second session of the Council of Chalcedon. The “Faith of the 318” (the Nicene Creed) was read aloud to great applause. The imperial commissioners then had the “Faith of the 150” read aloud to less applause but no dissent. Kelly suggests that there was some reticence to place it on the same level as the Creed of Nicaea, even though the participants regarded it as merely an expansion of the original Nicene Creed and did not deny its authenticity as the statement endorsed at Constantinople. It seems that the fathers simply preferred to use the Nicene Creed.¹⁰⁸ But the problem remained: it did not say enough about the Holy Spirit in response to those who denied his deity.

Throughout fifth and well into the sixth century, it became increasingly common to regard the Creed of Constantinople as little more than an expanded version of the Nicene Creed, so that by the Middle Ages the original differences between the two creeds were largely forgotten and the Creed of Constantinople came to be known simply as the Nicene Creed.¹⁰⁹ Thus the Nicene Creed as we know it was admitted as authoritative in East and West alike from 451 onward. At first it was used primarily for baptisms but during the sixth century in Constantinople was used also within the communion service or as part of the preparation for communion during the sixth century in Constantinople. It appears that Charlemagne inserted it into the service after the Gospel around 798, a practice that came from Ireland and England. Around 1014, Rome placed it into the liturgy as well, where it has remained down to the present day.¹¹⁰

The Filioque Controversy

One new theological element later inserted into the text of the creed became the subject of significant controversy and a contributing cause to the Great Schism between the East and West (1054): the *filioque* [that the Holy Spirit proceeds from

the Father *and the Son*] clause. Kelly notes that the theology of the procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son rose to prominence in the trinitarian thought of the fourth century through the impetus of Hilary and came to full expression in Augustine's theology. Due to Augustine's dominating influence, the double procession of the Spirit spread throughout the West in the following centuries. By the seventh century the double procession had taken such a hold on Spanish Christianity that at the third council of Toledo in 589 the Visigothic king (of Hispania, Septimania, and Gallicia) Reccared gave a brief exposition of the faith that spoke of the *filioque* in his address to the bishops.¹¹¹ It excluded any remnant of Arian teaching from the doctrine of Christ. For saying that the Spirit comes from the Son as well as the Father meant that whatever the Father does, the Son also does. Were the Father to do something that the Son does not, it might imply an inferior status for the Son. It is not clear whether the word *filioque* was actually inserted into the Nicene Creed at Toledo.

The *filioque* became a full-blown issue between the East and the West when Charlemagne became king of the Franks in 768 (and later, emperor). He soon became an advocate of the *filioque* and sought to persuade the papacy to support its introduction into the Creed. At the ecumenical council at Nicaea in 787, Pope Hadrian gave his approval to a creed circulated by the Patriarch of Constantinople that spoke of the Spirit proceeding from the Father alone. When Charlemagne rebuked the pope for supporting such a statement, the pope countered that this teaching was congruent with the statements of the church fathers from the beginning. In 796–797 at the synod of Cividale, Paulinus justified the insertion of the *filioque* into the Creed of Constantinople: “It no more violated the principle that new creeds must not be framed than did the alterations which the fathers of 381 had felt obliged to make in it. It had become necessary to interpolate ‘and from the Son’ on account of those heretics who whisper that the Holy Spirit is from the Father alone.”¹¹²

By the ninth century the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son was taught throughout the Western Church. The *filioque* had been inserted into the Creed in Spain, France, Germany, and even northern Italy. In 809–810 Charlemagne assembled a council in Aachen that spoke in favor of the *filioque*. He then sent a delegation to convince Pope Leo III to insert it into the creed but to no avail. Concerned about relations with the East, the pope acknowledged the orthodoxy of the *filioque* but added “not all essential truths were enshrined in the creed.”¹¹³ Rome declined to tamper with the authorized text for two more centuries. The exact date when the Western church actually authorized its inclusion remains cloudy.

The Athanasian Creed

Of the three ecumenical creeds, the Athanasian Creed (often called the *Quicumque Vult*, “whoever wishes”—the opening line of the Creed in Latin) probably is the least well known and appears as the most intimidating, both in terms of its length and its

language.¹¹⁴ Named after Athanasius, whose name is synonymous with orthodoxy (though Athanasius could not have written this creed, since it appeared a century and a half after his death), the Athanasian Creed came to be seen as a summary of the orthodox Christian faith. In recent centuries it has declined in popularity¹¹⁵ and lost its place as a teaching tool in seminaries and as a confession within the liturgy in many churches. As a result, increasing numbers of pastors and people have little or no familiarity with this Creed. Nonetheless, Lutheran congregations continue to read the Creed, in whole or in part, on Trinity Sunday.

The history of how the Athanasian Creed came into existence remains shrouded in some mystery. This much seems certain. It is a creed of western origin. Westra notes that it has no “Greek or Eastern counterpart.”¹¹⁶ The creed as we know it made its earliest appearance in the sermons of Caesarius, primate of Arles (502–542) in southern Gaul,¹¹⁷ a famous preacher and churchman who collected texts in his “struggle to find a summary of catholic faith.”¹¹⁸ The Creed appears in a codex that includes a preface stating that since both clergy and lay people need to be familiar the faith, there is here written out the catholic faith according to the fathers, and “we ought both ourselves frequently to read it and to instruct others in it.”¹¹⁹ Caesarius and his contemporaries considered the Creed to be a medium of instruction, a handy summary of the orthodox faith of the previous two centuries. About this “there can be no reasonable doubt.” The idea that it served as a hymn is a secondary development.¹²⁰

Various theories have been put forward with regard to its authorship, theological origin, and historical context. Whoever wrote it drew heavily on Augustine’s theology for its trinitarian section. The author also made use of Vincent of Lérin’s *Excerpta*, the “quarry from which” the author drew the body of the Christological section in its argument and wording, with little revision. For this reason, the Monastery of Lérin must be regarded as the “cradle of the creed.” Kelly contends Caesarius could have composed the Creed since he had been trained in school of Lérin, but in the end he believes that the author remains anonymous. He has little doubt that a single author was responsible for the text, probably a contemporary of Caesarius whom Caesarius might have asked to write it. Following “his usual practice,” he attached the traditional title, “the Faith of Athanasius” on the ground that it embodied the teaching of the great defender of the Nicæan faith.¹²¹

After its appearance at Arles, references to the Athanasian Creed increase over the next several centuries, reflecting its growing prestige and status as a tool of instruction and a touchstone of orthodoxy. Kelly notes that by the time of Charlemagne, its prestige as a summary of orthodox teaching useful for improving the theological education of the clergy reached a pinnacle. It also began to find its way into Psalters along with the Apostles Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. From there it moved into the divine office and began to be sung as a canticle.¹²² By the sixteenth century it had taken its place alongside the Apostles and Nicene Creeds as one of the three classic or ecumenical creeds of the church. Within the Roman

church it came to be used at prime on Sundays. Among Protestants it was given the same respect as the other two creeds by the Lutheran Book of Concord, and other Protestant statements of faith acknowledge it. The Book of Common Prayer called for it to be recited occasionally in place of the Apostles Creed. But in the twentieth century, such liturgical usage within Sunday services gradually became reduced to Trinity Sunday.¹²³

Since the Athanasian Creed serves the important function of summarizing, preserving, and conveying the orthodox faith as set forth at Nicaea and the subsequent councils, it makes a different contribution than does the Nicene Creed. The fourth and fifth centuries were centuries of tremendous theological fervor and creativity. Some of the greatest bishops and theologians that the church has ever had lived during those years. These teachers—Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, and Augustine—weighed in on the most important theological issues of their day (not to mention contributing to the catechesis of the church as well). But after nearly two centuries of creative activity, the church had to let the dust settle, sift through it, and consolidate the gains that it had made.¹²⁴

In this regard, the era of the Nicene Creed and the era of the Athanasian Creed resemble the sixteenth century. The 1520s were a period of theological revolution that sent shockwaves through the entire church. Luther's writings rolling off the printing press nearly every month provided new insight upon new insight, capturing and captivating theologians around Europe. By 1530 the Lutherans submitted something of a new way of conceiving the church and its faith with their presentation of the Augsburg Confession. But in the second half of the sixteenth-century, Lutherans had to step back, take stock of their gains, sift the wheat from the chaff, and define what it meant to be Lutheran. And so the Formula of Concord, as a summary and explication of the Augsburg Confession, lacks the "pizzaz" that many find in the Augsburg Confession. Yet it serves a critical function of passing on to the next generation the insights of Luther and the Augsburg Confession.

The Athanasian Creed serves a function for the era that preceded it similar to that which the Formula of Concord served for its preceding era. Thus, in both form and content, the Athanasian Creed provides an excellent summary and window into the theological activity and decisions of the fourth and fifth centuries of the church. As such, we should expect nothing particularly "new" in terms of its content or formulation. Instead, the Athanasian Creed seeks to restate what the creeds and councils had affirmed. Contrary to how many perceive it (because of its language), it simply seeks to lay out guidelines or boundaries for how one speaks of the Trinity and Christology.¹²⁵ It is as if to say, "if you go outside these boundaries, then you are no longer speaking of the Trinity or of Christ in the way that the Scriptures speak."

In structure, the Athanasian Creed follows the pattern of the *Te Deum Laudamus*, first confessing the Trinity and then confessing Christ. Accordingly, the first half of the Athanasian Creed deals with the Trinity by summarizing the

fourth-century discussions and decisions. The second half deals with the incarnation and person of Christ, thus summarizing the late-fourth-century (Council of Constantinople) and fifth-century (Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon) discussions and decisions regarding Christology. A brief statement introduces the Creed, followed by a transitional statement between the trinitarian and Christological sections and a concluding statement that reaffirms the importance of confessing the catholic faith.

The first half of the Athanasian Creed (par. 3–26) recapitulates the trinitarian debates and controversies of the fourth century as reflected in the Nicene Creed, the theology of the Cappadocians, and especially the theology and method of Augustine. With regard to the Trinity, it lays out a very simple thesis (par. 3–4) that states, “Do not speak of the Trinity so as to give the impression that there are three Gods and do not speak of the Trinity so as to give the impression that there are not three persons.” In this we may see the boundaries set over and against Arianism¹²⁶ and Sabellianism. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God, yet there are not three Gods but one God. The Creed affirms the unity of the three persons first with a set of three attributes (uncreated, eternity, unending) and three titles (Almighty, God, Lord). Similarly, it preserves the distinction of the persons by affirming the different relations that they share within the Trinity. The Father is both uncreated and unbegotten. The Son is uncreated but begotten. The Spirit is uncreated, not begotten, but proceeding. The Creed does not attempt to define these terms. It is enough to know that in some way these terms distinguish the persons from one another.

The second half of the Athanasian Creed (par. 28–39) turns to questions of Christology and thus picks up the theological reflection on the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that the Son of God became a human creature. It reiterates the decisions of the three councils regarding the person of Christ. It affirms against Apollinaris that Jesus was a complete and genuine human creature, possessing both body and a rational soul. Similarly, it affirms against Nestorius that the Son is one person and not two persons. Kelly contends that the Christological section has Nestorianism deliberately and completely in its sights. This includes the affirmation that one nature is not transformed into the other. Kelly cautions that even though it might be interpreted against Eutyches (an outspoken opponent of Nestorius) and his followers (who tended to confuse the two natures), it is not explicitly directed against the Eutychians, most of whom would have affirmed that the “humanity was taken into deity.”¹²⁷ Then it reiterates part of the Chalcedonian definition when it asserts that Christ is one not by the confusion of substance but by a unity of person (though it does not use the language of “two natures”)

The text concludes by continuing with the narrative of Christ’s biography in the language of the Nicene Creed that speaks of Christ’s suffering, resurrection, session at the right hand of the Father, and second coming. It also inserts the “descent into hell” into the narrative. It speaks of Christ’s return for judgment in words that

are likely to make the average Lutheran cringe with at least a little nervousness, for it speaks of Christ giving eternal life to those who have done good things and plunging into eternal fire those that have done evil things. Does this run contrary to the Reformation teaching that we are justified by grace alone, Christ alone, and faith alone? Two points have to be kept in mind. First, the Athanasian Creed here simply reflects the way in which the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the last judgment. Second, the last judgment portrays a public judgment, and in public judgments public evidence is brought forward—in this case, the fruits of faith or the lack of such fruits of faith. It reflects the public teaching of the time in which it was composed.

The confidence and uncompromising tone of the introduction (par. 1–2), the transition from the trinitarian to the Christological sections (par. 27), and the conclusion (par. 40) provide many a twenty-first-century reader a certain shock. The introduction states that whoever wants to be saved must “hold the catholic faith” and “keep it whole and inviolate” or will otherwise perish eternally. The transition also asserts that it is “necessary for eternal salvation” to believe the incarnation. The conclusion again states, “A person cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully.” Does this mean that one needs to know and understand intellectually all that is said here? Bray points out that the Creed is not speaking of a purely rationalistic or intellectual grasping of the faith. He notes that the introduction speaks of “holding”—we might say “treasuring and cherishing”—what is here spoken of. Similarly, he points out that to hold to the faith means that we “worship one God in trinity” (par. 3).¹²⁸ Thus a person clings to the confession of Christ, both as the Son of God who is equal to the Father and Spirit and as the incarnate man who died and rose for our salvation.

So in spite of the unease that some may experience when reading the Athanasian Creed, a considered reflection will yield a different conclusion. “No other official document of creed sets forth, so incisively and with such majestic clarity, the profound theology implicit in the New Testament affirmation that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.’”¹²⁹

Conclusion

The three “ecumenical” creeds embraced by the sixteenth-century reformers and incorporated into *The Book of Concord* have very different histories. These histories emerged from places across the continent of Europe from East to West and were composed over spans of time stretching from the early church into the Middle Ages. Despite these differences in cultural setting and despite the various controversies in which the three creeds arose, they each confess and safeguard the gospel, setting it within the biblical witness to the triune God and the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. How they do that is the question to which we now turn.