

COUNCILS AND CREEDS

A SHORT HISTORY

The disciples of Christ, scattered by persecution, spread the gospel of the kingdom. In Egypt, these missionaries found a ready acceptance of the new religion and as usually happens, the growing numbers of believers began to gravitate toward certain charismatic leaders. The two most famous of these men were Arius and Athanasius, both of Alexandria.

Arius (c.250-336) held that Christ is the Son of God, and that because He is the Son He therefore had a beginning. “It is a necessary condition of the filial relation,” He wrote, “that the Father must be older than his Son. The Father and the Son are of “like substance” (or nature) and therefore Christ is divine and worthy of worship. (A century before Arius, another believer named Novation of Rome held a similar view. A short passage from his writings can be found on page 52 of this study.)

Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, headed the opposing party which held that the Father and the Son are of “one substance,” coequal, and coeternal. They asserted that the doctrine of Arius lowered the Son making Him less worthy of worship than the Father. It is worth noting here that the Egyptians had worshiped a triune God (Isis-Horus-Set, otherwise known as Amun-Mut-Khonsu) for thirty centuries.

Such heated debates took place between these two factions that the citizens of Alexandria amused themselves with theatrical satires and plays depicting the protagonists, and not many years went by before it could be said that nearly every Christian man and woman had an opinion concerning the nature of Christ. The Jews and Pagans exasperated things by their mocking derision.

The emperor Constantine was at first very amused by all the squabbling. It kept the people occupied. But as the controversy dragged on and on, he finally called a council of nearly 300 bishops to settle the matter. **The first ecumenical council of the Christian church took place in Nicaea, now in modern Turkey (c.325), 294 years after the death of Christ.** The presence of the emperor added to the vehemence of the arguments. He would listen to all sides and then rule. His verdict would decide truth.

As to the main point, **the Son was declared to be of the “same substance” with the Father.** Arius was branded a heretic and banished to one of the remote provinces of Illyricum. “I am persecuted,” He cried, “because I have taught that the Son had a beginning and the Father had not.”

The conclusion was ambiguous and settled nothing. The ruling of the Emperor was clear. He quickly issued letters denouncing Arius and ordered that anyone found with a copy of his writings must burn it or be put to death.

Concerning the nature of Christ, the first Nicene Creed reads: **“The Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes those who say that there was a time when the Son of God was not; and that before he was begotten he was not, and that he was made out of nothing, or out of another substance or essence, and is created, or changeable, or alterable.”**

At the Council of Nicaea, the debate was over the nature of Christ (begotten vs unbegotten). The nature of the Spirit was not an issue. It would be another fifty-six years before the church would decree worship of the Holy Spirit.

Now the Emperor Constantine was a base and vile criminal. He had murdered his son Crispus, his nephew Licinius, and suffocated in a steam-bath his wife of twenty years Fausta, mother of three of his sons. The public abhorrence of his deeds could not be concealed. A plaque comparing his reign to that of Nero was affixed to the palace gate. Constantine threatened to massacre the Roman populace who had insulted him.

This is the same Constantine who feigned a “conversion” to Christ, but not wanting to antagonize the pagan element, waited until he lay on his death bed to be “baptized” (just in case there is indeed a judgment). He is the same who decreed that Christians and pagans should “rest” on the same day - Sunday.

The favorite sister of Constantine, a supporter of the disreputed teacher, prevailed upon her brother and barely three years after the date of the council Arius was restored to favor. He was treated by the whole court with the respect which would have been due to an innocent and oppressed man. His faith was approved by the synod of Jerusalem; and the emperor seemed impatient to repair his injustice. He issued a royal command that Arius should receive the holy communion in the cathedral of Constantinople, but on the same day which had been fixed for his triumph, Arius died very suddenly and under strange circumstances. The opponents of Arius said that God had answered their prayers and saved the church from the worst of her enemies. The three principle leaders of the Catholics, Athanasius of Alexandria, Eustathius of Antioch, and Paul of Constantinople were deposed, accused by numerous councils; and were afterwards banished to distant provinces. The believers were left to choose what they would believe with regard to the death of Arius - be it miracle or poisoning.

The council which took place in Nicaea (c.325) was only the first of nine “world” councils in early church history. Creed followed creed. The seventh ecumenical council, the second to take place in Nicaea (c.787) was convened by the Byzantine empress Irene to rule on the use of saints’ images and icons in religious devotions. The council declared that the veneration of images was “legitimate” and the intercession of saints “efficacious,” yet their veneration must be distinguished from the worship due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

THE NICENE CREED AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Regarding the Holy Spirit, the original Nicene Creed stated simply: **“We believe in the Holy Spirit.”**

This was later modified by the Council of Constantinople (c.381) to read: **“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets.”**

THE APOSTLES’ CREED

The Apostles’ creed is not the work of the Apostles themselves. It had its origin in the form of a confession of faith recited by the candidate before baptism. It is based on a formula current in Rome (c.200) although its present form did not appear before the 6th century. It is used by Roman Catholics and many Protestant churches but has never been accepted by the Orthodox churches.

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.” *The Apostles' Creed*

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

The first clear reference to this writing was made during the 6th century, therefore Athanasius himself is unlikely the author. It is Latin in origin, and in the Middle Ages it was regularly used in church services. Since the Reformation its use in worship service has been confined to the Roman Catholic church and the Anglican Communion, although it is now infrequently recited.

“We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. We distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance. For the Father is a distinct person; the Son is a distinct person; and the Holy Spirit is a distinct person. ... The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal. Nevertheless, there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being. Thus there are not three uncreated beings, not three boundless beings, but one uncreated being and one boundless being. ... Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But there are not three gods, but one God.” *From the Athanasian Creed*

References:

1. History of the Intellectual Development of Europe, Volume 1, Draper, John William M.D., LL.D.1876. Chapter 6, part 2; Chapter 9, part 1 and 2;
2. The Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia (see Nicaea, councils of; Arianism; creed)
3. History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon 1845, part 4