

# The Historical Background of the Ecumenical Creeds

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## Part I. The Origin and Background of the Apostles' Creed

Of the three great Ecumenical Creeds of Christianity the simplest, and at least in the Western Church, also the most widely accepted one is the Apostles' Creed. Lutherans have particular reason to hold this confession in highest esteem, since Luther in his Small Catechism has given us an explanation of the Three Articles that is matchless both in form and content. This gives Lutheran teachers and pastors an aid in the instruction of children and adults, which is not equaled elsewhere in the entire field of Christian catechetics. With this you are, of course, thoroughly familiar. Our present purpose is to discuss the origin and historical background of this ancient creed. If this paper will serve to heighten your interest and deepen your appreciation, even if only in moderate degree, it will have been well worth the effort.

We may as well begin our discussion by considering the name of this confession of faith, the "*Apostles*" Creed. If this were to mean no more than that the doctrinal substance of these articles is the same as that taught and confessed by the Apostles of our Lord, that it is therefore Apostolic in content, then there would be no cause to disagree. But other views have been given wide currency. It has been held that our Lord taught His disciples this summary of Christian doctrine word by word during the forty days after His resurrection, just as He had previously taught them the Lord's Prayer.

More fanciful is the ancient legend that the newly inspired Apostles uttered the twelve articles of the Creed on Pentecost, or solemnly pronounced to each other when parted in order to set forth on their great mission of preaching the Gospel in the entire world. Thus Peter is made the author of one clause, James of another, John of a third, and so forth. Though this legend is of great age and was commonly accepted even some time after the Reformation, it must nevertheless be rejected, since it not only lacks all Biblical support, but fails to account for the existence of many other statements of faith, including such a prominent one as the Nicene Creed of the Eastern Church, for which the claim of apostolicity was made just as emphatically. Officially Rome still holds fast to this traditional account. But modern scholars, including men of the most conservative type, have demonstrated beyond doubt that the formulation of our Articles took place over a period of several centuries and that it involved a number of important changes and additions, so that we may properly speak of the development of the Creed.

It may well be asked, however, just how we can be sure of this. The answer to this question constitutes one of the most absorbing chapters in the history of scholarly research. It will be interesting, I hope, to follow the method by which such results are achieved. Briefly stated, it consists simply in taking the form which is under discussion and tracing it back through the centuries, searching all the available documentary sources, the many writings of ancient authors, until one arrives at a point where it becomes impossible to push back the frontier of the unknown any farther. Thus some scholar of the future, probing among the wreckage of our present civilization, might do research work on—let us say—our Declaration of Independence, finding it quoted in various textbooks, tracing it from one author to another, from one edition to another, from our Twentieth Century to the Nineteenth, and then to the Eighteenth, until he would arrive at the year 1776, where his search would end because, as we in our day still know, there was no such Declaration before that time.

His task would be made easy by the fact that there is only one form of this Declaration, and that there are no other documents that resemble it sufficiently to make the identification difficult. In the case of the Apostles' Creed this is not so simple, however. It is easy at the outset, because this symbol has stood unchanged as a confession of the Christian Church for many centuries. It becomes harder, when one gets to the early Middle Ages where one meets a number of North African, Italian, and Western European versions which

resemble our familiar text quite closely, and yet show some undeniable points of difference. The situation becomes baffling when the inquiring researcher finds that for about four centuries the Church at Rome, which during the period which we have just reviewed consistently claimed this Creed as its own, itself used a symbol which was entirely different in form, namely the Nicene Creed. At this point the search might conceivably end, leaving the student vexed by the thought that those obviously related Western Creeds of which we spoke before seem to imply a common ancestor, which he nevertheless is unable to discover. The mystery is solved, however, when in the sources which antedate this gap of four centuries the scholar finds convincing evidence of a Roman Creed, which, while not identical with our received version, is yet obviously the same, but in an earlier stage of development. The form had not yet set.

One might think that from this point on it would be a simple matter to follow the trail until one meets a plain reference to the introduction of this Creed at Rome. For at this point in the history of the Roman Church the pages are by no means blank. But new difficulties crop up. We are in the period when the Church was a persecuted church and when men were in earnest about what was still reported as a traditional custom by Jerome almost a century after these persecutions had ceased. He writes: "The symbol of our faith and hope which is handed down from the Apostles is not written upon a chart and with ink, but upon tables of flesh." His famous contemporary, Augustine, supports this: "By hearing is the symbol learned, and it is not written upon tablets or upon some other material, but in the heart." So the scholar must shift his attention from a search for direct quotations of the entire Creed to occasional references to some part of the confession, exercising extreme care so as not to be deceived by a chance similarity of expression, but to be sure that his clue warrants the conclusion that the author whom he quotes really was familiar with the form that has been traced so far. It is this part of the search which involves the greatest and most painstaking kind of work, a patient sifting of all the documentary sources, plus a careful evaluation of each grain of evidence. And it is a wise scholar who knows when to stop, lest his imagination take over where his judgment is no longer supported by facts.

That is the method. Now what are the results? By a careful searching of the available sources it has become possible to establish with complete certainty the creed that was in use in Rome in the Fourth Century, before that peculiar gap of almost five centuries which we mentioned before, but after the Church had emerged from the period when it veiled its confessions in silence. This creed, which is commonly called the Old Roman Symbol, is so much like the later version of the Eighth Century that the connection is obvious. The differences are all in the nature of supplementary additions, which are satisfactorily explained by the long interval of time that had elapsed. If the evidence for the wording of the Old Roman Symbol is convincing, then a far advanced base has been established, from which one may proceed still farther into the past, or from which one may with equal convenience trace the subsequent changes in the text. It is of considerable importance, therefore, to know just how this point is established.

Our first witness is a certain Rufinus of Aquileia. About the year 390 he wrote a commentary on the Creed which was in use in his own province of Aquileia, comparing it with that of Rome from which it differed in a number of points. The work is written with considerable care, and thus provides us with a clear picture of the text of that time. We find almost identically the same text in the writings of Augustine, around the turn of the century. This is important as confirming the text, but the testimony of Rufinus is still the more significant one because it identifies his version with Rome.

The next witness is Marcellus, bishop of Ancyra, better known in our day as Ankara, the capital of Turkey. He is the author of a letter to Julius, bishop of Rome, in which he sought to defend his orthodoxy, which was under fire, and not without some reason. In this letter, and apparently in order to convince Julius of the correctness of his teaching, he quoted a Greek version of the Roman Symbol, which agrees almost completely with the Latin text of Rufinus. This is highly important because of its date, 341, proving that the Old Roman Symbol is of even older origin. These testimonies established the date of this version with complete certainty. At least three other witnesses, though of a later time, support the accuracy of the quotations, so that the text can be given with assurance. Nor need we have any misgivings about accepting these findings.

But scholars have not rested their case at this point. In spite of the fact that no earlier instance can be found where the Old Roman Symbol is quoted in its entirety, they have nevertheless pushed their search still

farther, and again not without results. Some of the most profitable sources are the writings of Tertullian of Carthage in North Africa. About the year 200 this prolific writer was crusading against a number of heresies current in his day, but also in favor of some extreme views of his own which eventually led him to become a member of the fanatical sect of Montanists. He was a man of intense convictions and a vehement defender of the catholic faith until his own defection. Having been a lawyer by profession he was rather much given to quoting well-established precedents, and thus it is that we find a considerable number of references to the fact that the Church had an established Rule of Faith (Creed), with which he assumes his readers as well as his opponents to be familiar. That immediately brings up the question whether this might possibly be the same Old Roman Symbol that was known to Rufinus and Marcellus. If so, then another long step has been taken in tracing the history of the Creed, for then we can assume that it must have originated not later than the last quarter of the Second Century. And the evidence is strong. Not only do we find a considerable number of recognizable allusions to many different clauses of the Creed, but in spite of the reluctance of that age to publish its Rule of Faith, yet we find Tertullian making no less than three complete credal statements, none of which are exactly like the creed of Marcellus and Rufinus, but all of which are quite parallel in form, one in particular coming very close to the Fourth Century version. Together with an introductory paragraph it runs as follows: ‘The Rule of Faith is altogether one, sole, immovable, and irreformable—namely, to believe in one God Almighty, the Maker of the world, and His Son. Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, on the third day raised again from the dead, received into the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, coming to judge the quick and the dead, also through the resurrection of the flesh.’ You will note that there is no reference to the third person of the Trinity. This, however, is supplied by the other two versions, which we have from Tertullian.

Another witness from an entirely different geographical area confirms the testimony of this fiery African: Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in France, or Gaul, as it was still called at that time. His writings were produced about twenty or twenty-five years before those of Tertullian. Because Irenaeus was a Greek, of Eastern birth and training, and because the Eastern creeds differ quite widely from the Western, not in content but in form and expression, it is particularly significant that his allusions and quotations (three complete credal statements) come as close as they do to the Old Roman Symbol. It is altogether unlikely that these resemblances should be purely accidental. It is therefore from these two authors, Irenaeus and Tertullian, that modern scholars have taken the evidence from which they have established the reconstructed Second Century Text. And noting the date of the writings of Irenaeus they have come to the conclusion that the Old Roman Symbol must have originated not later than the third quarter of the Second Century, between 150 and 175.

Can the veil be pushed back any further? McGiffert, an outstanding American scholar in this field, whom I have used quite extensively in the preceding account, thinks not. For reasons of which more shall be said later the year 160 is about his limit. Others go back farther, Harnack to 150, Kattenbusch and Zahn even to 120. They support their view by quotations from authors of that period. But I believe that McGiffert is right when he shows that these references do not cover nearly all parts of the Creed, and that they are not close enough to the original to be quotations or intentional allusions. In this respect McGiffert’s caution appeals to me very much. And it seems that even those scholars who are willing to go farther into the past are ready to concede that the evidence, which they have assembled from outward sources, is no longer as convincing as before. For now the discussion begins to turn around what is called internal evidence, proof which is drawn from the Creed itself, rather than from outside sources.

In order to follow this argument we must understand what was happening in Rome about the year 150 which might have some bearing on a formulation of the Christian faith. At this time a fantastic form of religious speculation called Gnosticism seriously disturbed the Church. A certain Valentine was the most brilliant and persuasive advocate of this cult. At the same time the peace of the Church was threatened by the teachings of a certain Marcion who is sometimes classed with the Gnostics, sometimes acquitted of the charge. It will not be necessary to take up these teachings in detail, nor to show wherein Marcion differed from the Gnostics. It will be enough to note three points in which they roughly agreed. The first was the claim that the creation of this world was the work of an inferior God, and that the supreme God dwells on an infinitely remote level of

existence. Marcion put it this way that the God of the Old Testament is the God of the Jews, of the Law, of a stern though righteous retribution; but that the God of the New Testament is the God of love, the one who sends his son for the salvation of men. The second and most important point is this: Many of the Gnostics, but Marcion with particular emphasis, taught a view that goes by the name of Docetism, namely that the body with which the Savior was endowed was a phantom body, so that the suffering and death of Christ, while such in appearance, was not so in fact. This would then also imply that the Savior was not truly born, but only assumed a phantom body as a sort of an outer garb. Finally, both Marcion and the Gnostics taught that the flesh of man, as the material part of his being, is by its nature inherently and unchangeably evil, simply because it is matter: that it can therefore not share in the resurrection, but must be destroyed forever as something which is beyond salvation. The resurrection was held by them to be an experience of which the soul alone would be capable, which the flesh could not share. The influence of the Gnostics was of relatively short duration. One might even speak of their views as a passing fad. But Marcion was an able organizer, and formed his followers into congregations that not only maintained themselves in Rome for some three centuries, but also spread to other parts of the Roman Empire. This will explain why Tertullian was still so vehement against this false teacher who after all had died some 40 or 50 years before.

Now McGiffert contends that a close examination of the contents of the Creed in its earliest known version, that of the Second Century, will show that it is not an evangelistic missionary creed, designed to set forth the great facts of Christian teaching, but that it is a polemical formula, written in answer to the heresies of Marcion. This could then hardly have been earlier than about 160. He builds up his argument by claiming that the description of God as the "Father Almighty" is an obvious attempt to identify the Christian God of the New Testament with the "Lord of Hosts" of the Old Testament. For the Greek term *pantokratwr* is indeed the word that is used by the ancient translations to translate the "SABAOTH" of the Old Testament. It emphasizes the rulership of God. But it has been correctly pointed out that it would take a stronger statement than this to provide an effective barrier against the Marcionite error.

McGiffert scores a better point when he makes the observation that in the last phrase of the Symbol, "the resurrection of the flesh," it is the word "flesh" which carries the emphasis, and that this would therefore constitute a specific repudiation of the error that the flesh cannot share the redemption wrought by the Savior. I think that it will have to be conceded that the words can be so understood. Finally McGiffert takes the clause, "who was born of Mary the Virgin, was crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried," as emphasizing the reality of the birth and the reality of the suffering and death, over against the docetic view that the Redeemer had only assumed a phantom body, and that His suffering and death lacked reality. But again one must say that this would be a very mild and weak way of rejecting such a flagrant error.

McGiffert's main point, however, seems to be not so much what the Creed says concerning Jesus Christ, but what it does not say, compared with what this scholar thinks it should say. He writes: "Nothing is said of Christ's teachings, or of his works of mercy and power; nothing of His fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, upon which all the early missionaries, whether addressing Jews or gentiles, laid the very greatest stress, upon which in fact they based their claim that Christ was a messenger sent from God; nothing is said of the salvation brought by Jesus and nothing of the purpose of his life and death." (The Apostles' Creed, p. 14.) On this McGiffert bases his view that the Old Roman Symbol was not an evangelistic or missionary creed. This argument makes it clear, however, that McGiffert finds the Saviorship of Christ in the teaching and example rather than in the great redemptive acts of our Lord. In his view "salvation" is something that was "brought" rather than wrought by Jesus. If we note how both Peter and Paul rest their Gospel on the resurrection of Jesus, naturally with reference to the significance of the suffering and death that had gone before, if we recall how important the Incarnation is to John, both in his gospel and epistles, if we recall how Peter refers to the Ascension as the explanation of the miracle of Pentecost, how conscious he and his fellow apostles were of the manner in which the rule of Christ determined every event in their work (e.g., Acts 4:10f.), if we add the way in which Paul (Eph. 4) speaks of the giving of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, which was done for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, as being all a great gift of the ascended Christ, if we finally include the many references of the apostles to the return of

Christ as the great conclusion of His glorious work,—then we must surely be strengthened in our conviction that the Saviorship of Christ rests above all in His great and glorious works. To a creed that lists these great redemptive acts of our Lord with such completeness we will not only grant the tribute of recognizing it as an evangelistic and missionary creed, but we will add that it is singularly well suited to fulfill this great function.

If McGiffert sees nothing more in our Creed than a defense that the Church of that day sought to erect against the encroachments of heresy, then he has missed the true significance of this confession. Let the original form be recognized as the great and yet simple statement of the Christian Gospel, which it is. It is either that or, if we follow McGiffert, a rather weak rebuttal of a dangerous but nevertheless localized form of error. We prefer the former view. We know that some of these basic articles eventually came to be amplified in such a way that they are now pointed at some particular error. We are ready to grant that some of this may have been done at quite an early date. We are ready to grant that the documentary evidence for an earlier origin of the Creed than in the days of Marcion is not of such a nature that it warrants any positive assurance, and will therefore view with considerable caution the arguments of enthusiastic discoverers of such proof, so-called. But we are not ready to yield the positive Gospel character of the original Creed. That is the natural way in which the Trinitarian Formula of Baptism developed into a simple confession of the Gospel truths in which the catechumen had been instructed and the faith which he now professed.

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Going back to the established text of the Fourth Century, we now move in the opposite direction, with the current of time rather than against it, in an attempt to trace the change from the Old Roman Symbol to the received version that we now use. The first question is why this Symbol which had become so closely identified with the church of Rome should suddenly have been discontinued and supplanted by an Eastern Creed which must not only have had a foreign sound because of its newness but which because of its rhetorical quality and the use of abstract and philosophical terminology must have been in strange contrast to the beautiful simplicity of the older Creed which so faithfully reflected the Western habit of thought. One can well imagine that it would require powerful motives to bring about such a profound departure from a well-established use, particularly in a church that placed so much emphasis on tradition as did Rome. And so it was. Rufinus and Augustine, two of the witnesses whose evidence helped to establish the Fourth Century text, were still living when the beginning of the next century ushered in a tremendous movement, the Great Migration of the German tribal nations, a movement which was to lead to the Fall of the Roman Empire, at least in the West. Those are the years when Alaric and his Goths captured and plundered Rome, when Theodoric ruled the greater part of Italy as King of the Goths, when Vandals who had swept through Gaul and Spain and had then established themselves on the African shores of the Mediterranean, now came up into Italy at the call of a despairing Roman Empress, rescuing her indeed, but laying Rome waste a second time and incidentally thereby giving the languages of Western Europe a new word—vandalism.

The Church of Rome suffered, but succeeded in maintaining itself, even commanding a considerable measure of respect. But one thing its leaders feared. Most of these German nations, and particularly the Goths and Vandals, were adherents of the heresy of Arius, who denied the deity of the Son of God, speaking of Him as an intermediate being—the foremost creature of God, but a creature nevertheless. This is the heresy that was condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325. And now the bishops of Rome feared that this false doctrine might gain a foothold in the Church of Rome itself. So the Nicene Creed, which was an emphatic and specific rejection of Arianism was introduced into the Liturgy and used for the instruction of catechumens. If some of these Goths and Vandals should now become members of the Roman Church, they would thereby be renouncing their Arian heresy and embracing the teachings of the Catholic Church. So matters stood for about four centuries, the Old Roman Symbol being gone and all but forgotten in Rome itself.

In the meantime, however, the Western churches had not lost their creeds, and quoted them in the full text with increasing frequency. For a strange thing was happening. As the different German nations settled in their newly conquered lands, they began to forget their Arian heresy and came more and more under the

influence of the prevailing catholicism of the established churches. By the end of the Sixth Century the crisis was pretty well past. But Rome still continued its use of the Eastern, the Nicene Creed, while elsewhere the faith was being confessed in terms that clearly showed that the Old Roman Symbol was still exercising a notable measure of influence. For these later creeds clearly follow the older one, quite closely in the case of those texts which originated in Italy, less so in the case of texts from North Africa, Spain, and France. But in all of them the resemblance is still to be recognized.

As certain new expressions come into view, a few of them meet with general acceptance, and so gradually merge into the text of the Old Roman Creed. So a text of the year 450 (St. Nicetas) adds the one word "catholic" to the phrase, "the holy church." Perhaps a century later a certain Eusebius Gallus added the explanatory phrase, "the communion of saints." Through him the simpler version, "sitteth at the right hand of the Father," became "the right hand of God the Father almighty." Here also originated the word "conceived" in the article of the Incarnation, also the details of suffering and death in the description of the Passion. Two other clauses were mentioned previously, but had not been received into the Old Roman Symbol. One dealt with the descent into hell (Rufinus), the other was the beautiful closing reference to "the life everlasting" (Cyprian, Marcellus, Augustine.) But evidently they had found favor in the meantime, and now appear in the final version. A final innovation is noted for the first time in a Gallican Sacramentary, which adds "maker of heaven and earth" to the first article. This then is the ultimate text of the Western Creed, as it was reintroduced in Rome about the middle of the Eighth Century.

Scholars have long wondered why this Gallican version, which after all shows a number of changes from the earlier form, should have been chosen instead of a number of Italian texts which were still considerably closer to the old Roman original. It has been pointed out that at this time the Papacy was sorely pressed by the aggressive Lombard kings of Northern Italy, and was looking toward that land where the power of a decadent line of Frankish kings was obviously passing into the hands of a rising family, the House of Pepin, which eventually became the dynasty of Charlemagne. Under such circumstances it would indeed be a most skillful diplomatic maneuver thus to compliment these still rather raw Westerners by introducing their version of the Creed into the worship of a church with so old a tradition. One might say that this would involve a remarkable degree of political foresight. But there have been other instances where Rome has shown this same ability. So this explanation would seem to be as good as any other, if not even perhaps a little better. We see no reason to reject it.

So the Western Church came into its Creed. Its origin is largely identified with the history of Rome and is undeniably Catholic. But it is truly catholic, that is universal, in its expression of the simple truths of the Gospel. And it is to this true universal confession that Luther and his associates pledged their continued allegiance in the stirring days of the Reformation, including it with the other Ecumenical Creeds as evidence that they had not departed from the original uncorrupted faith of the true Church of Christ. It is for that same reason that we in our day should not only retain, but restudy this precious confessional heritage, defending it against all attacks from without, but guarding particularly also against the inward danger of wasting this priceless treasure by our own neglect. A creed is truly a creed when its evangelical content is both Biblical and, therefore, truly Apostolic.

### **The Development of the Apostles' Creed**

Parentheses indicate expressions that were omitted in subsequent versions. Italics indicate the final additions. The articulation is partly according to Schaff (*Creeds of Christendom*), partly according to Briggs (*Theological Symbolics*).

#### *Second Century Text* (Reconstructed)

1. I believe in (one) GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY;
2. and in CHRIST JESUS, His Son;

3. who was born of Mary the Virgin;
4. was crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried;
5. on the third day rose from the dead;
6. ascended into heaven;
7. sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
8. from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead;
9. (and) in the HOLY GHOST;
- 10.
- 11.
12. the resurrection of the flesh.

*Fourth Century Text*  
(Old Roman Symbol)

1. I believe in GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY;
2. and in CHRIST JESUS, His only begotten Son, our Lord;
3. who was born of the Holy Ghost and Mary the Virgin;
4. was crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried;
5. on the third day rose from the dead;
6. ascended into heaven;
7. sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
8. from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead;
9. (and) in the HOLY GHOST;
10. the holy Church;
11. the forgiveness of sins;
12. the resurrection of the flesh.

*Eighth Century Text*  
(Received Version)

1. I believe in GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, *maker of heaven and earth;*
2. and in JESUS CHRIST, HIS only begotten Son, our Lord;
3. who was *conceived* by the Holy Ghost, born of Mary the Virgin;
4. *suffered* under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, *dead*, and buried;
5. *He descended into hell*, on the third day He rose from the dead;
6. ascended into heaven;
7. sitteth on the right hand of *God* the Father *Almighty*;
8. from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
9. I *believe* in the HOLY GHOST,
10. the holy *catholic* Church, *the communion of saints*;
11. the forgiveness of sins;
12. the resurrection of the flesh, *and the life everlasting*.

## **Parts II and III. The Origin and Background of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed**

A year ago this conference listened patiently to a paper on the historical background of the Apostles' Creed. We noted the gradual process, extending over a period of 5 or 6 centuries, by which the original simple Baptismal Confession was enlarged, sometimes by a new phrase or clause, sometimes by the addition of a mere word or two. No single person can be named as the author, nor, except in a few instances, can any particular contributor be identified. Several of the phrases reveal a reaction against some specific error that was troubling the Church of that time. But none of these issues predominates to such an extent that it colors the entire Creed. That is why the simple confession that we call the Apostles' Creed has remained to this day what it was originally meant to be, a plain statement of the common faith of the ordinary Christian. More than any other Creed it speaks the simple language of the Bible and breathes the spirit of the Gospel.

Quite another situation confronts us when we consider the other Ecumenical Creeds, the Nicene and the Athanasian. Both reveal an utterly different historical background. The doctrinal controversies to which they refer are so plainly recognizable, the critical nature of the issues is so much in evidence, that they determine the outstanding features of both of these ancient symbols of the Church. To recognize this Fact does not imply an attempt to minimize or deny the importance and value of these Creeds, nor even to ignore their majesty and beauty. But it does indicate in what area their highest usefulness will be found to lie, and in what capacity they will best serve us today. The emphatic assertion of a truth that today is widely denied, the emphatic rejection of the corresponding error, these actions call for a degree of spiritual vigor that is becoming increasingly rare in our jaded age. We will study these examples with profit.

### **Part II. The Nicene Creed**

The situation that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed is without a parallel in the history of the Church for sheer dramatic quality. The Church which had lived under the shadow of persecution for more than two centuries, which had only a few years before endured the cruelest and bloodiest ordeal of all, the persecution which had been launched in the days of the Emperor Diocletian and which still goes by his name, that same Church now found itself enjoying the warm glow of Imperial favor and protection. A young military leader, Constantine, had risen to sudden power in the west and, casting his lot with Christianity, in a brilliant succession of victories had gained control over the Western part of the Roman Empire. After an uneasy truce of about ten years he had also overthrown the Eastern Emperor, his brother-in-law Licinius, and now wielded undisputed authority. Almost overnight the Church became the recipient of every kind of Imperial favor and support. But Constantine had one request, which he made known in no uncertain terms. He needed a united Empire. Therefore he wanted a united Church. And he had heard that the Church was divided on some fine point of doctrine. The First Ecumenical Council of the Church, Nicea, 325, was the result. It was called for the express purpose of settling those controversial matters. Over three hundred bishops accepted the invitation of their Imperial host and welcomed him with extravagant praise when he appeared in their midst. And then they addressed themselves to the serious business of the Council.

The Church had long been deeply concerned about the Trinity specifically whether the fact that Scripture speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and treats each of these as divine, did not in some way contradict the oneness of God; in other words, whether the Church was not in fact disavowing the monotheism which it professed and slipping back into the old polytheism of the Gentiles, or at least teaching tritheism. Two solutions had been previously proposed, each of which was rejected because it was contrary to the Word of God. One of these was the idea that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are not distinct persons, but different modes or manners in which the one God revealed himself on different occasions, almost like an actor who appears in several different roles, perhaps in the course of a single performance. This thought, which would have made mockery of the mediatorship of Christ, was clearly untenable. But so was the other, namely that Jesus Christ was simply a man in whom the power of God was particularly in evidence, and who, because He had made such faithful use of this power, was eventually by adoption received into the Sonship of God. The references to the



work of the Holy Spirit were simply looked at as particular manifestations of that same power of God. One point at which this “dynamic Monarchianism,” as the doctrine was called, failed to measure up to the clear teachings of the Bible concerned the Word that became incarnate. For this *logos* was not merely an impersonal power of God, but a Word (*logos*) which was in the beginning, which was with God, which was God (John 1:1). It was a personal being, standing in the unique relationship to God that He was the Only Begotten of the Father (v. 14). Therefore Dynamism was also rejected, and it became established orthodoxy to speak of the separate personal existence before Incarnation of the *logos*-Christ, the Son of God, and to speak of Him as divine. If the bearing which this had on the oneness of God was not taken up and fully explained thereby, this does not seem to have troubled the Fathers too much. This was the state of affairs during the first two decades of the Fourth Century.

Then came Arius, a learned presbyter of Alexandria. Accepting without question the orthodox manner of speaking of the separate personal existence of the pre-incarnate Son of God, and applying to Him without question the attribute of Divinity, he nevertheless continued to seek for a rational explanation of the oneness of God. The views at which he eventually arrived, and which he set forth with great skill and persistence, constitute one of the subtlest, and at the same time most dangerous departures from Scriptural truth. Retaining the orthodox terminology of his time, he nevertheless claimed that the Father alone was God in the full meaning of the word; that when the Son is spoken of as divine, this is to be understood in a relative sense, as indicating the image of the Creator that was in Him. Eventually Arius admitted that he thought of the *logos* as a creation of God, God’s foremost creature, but a creature nevertheless; that He was created divine in order eventually to become incarnate and dwell among men. In answer to the question why then he is called God’s Son Arius drew attention to the passages (e.g. 1 John 3:1; 5:1) where all believers are called children of God, where they are also spoken of as “begotten of God.” The plausibility of these arguments did not save Arius when he was charged with heresy at the Synod of Alexandria in 321. He was duly removed from office and excommunicated. But it did gain him sympathizers, so that it was not long until he was looked upon as a martyr to the truth, a victim of the bigotry of the Alexandrians. It was this division of opinion that caused Constantine to call an Empire-wide council of bishops.

It will not be necessary to trace the details of the struggle that took place at Nicea, still less to follow the turbulent events of the later years, where because of the changing political trends and the capriciousness of the Emperors (Constantine included) the true confession of Nicea was often on the verge of being swept away by the errors that had been rejected at that first Ecumenical Council. It is enough to know that the cause of orthodoxy had an eloquent and able advocate, another Alexandrian presbyter by the name of Athanasius, much younger than Arius. Recognizing that far more was at stake than merely some theoretical views concerning the nature of the preexistent *logos*, Athanasius argued that our entire assurance of salvation is jeopardized if it rests in the hands of a Redeemer who is not true God. Insisting that Scripture shows the Son to be of the same nature as the Father, he exposed the fallacies of Arius with such skill that the Council not only condemned the latter’s heresy, excommunicating him and two diehard followers, but also expressed itself in a confession that sets forth the full divine majesty and glory of the Son, and does this in close connection with a singularly moving description of His redemptive work. The rejection of the opposite doctrine reflects an awareness of the part of the Nicene Fathers of the seriousness of the error with which they had been confronted. But it also emphasizes the note of strife and struggle.

The text of the original Creed of Nicea follows. A careful comparison with a version that came into use not long thereafter, and which is the accepted version of our day, will show where the latter agrees with, but also where it departs from the older form.

#### *The Nicene Creed of 325*

We believe in one God, the FATHER Almighty,  
Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord JESUS CHRIST, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the HOLY GHOST.

But those who say: ‘There was a time when he was not;’ and ‘He was not before he was made;’ and ‘He was made out of nothing;’ or ‘He is of another substance’ or ‘essence;’ or ‘the Son of God is created,’ ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable’—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

This was the decision of Nicea. By the grace of God, and in spite of the conflicting aims of men, it was a decision for the true teachings of God’s Word, and against the rationalizing ideas of men. And as such we value it highly. But it was a decision, a theological formulation, and—at least in many of its parts—it was an attempt to define the indefinable. To this is to be traced the difficulty under which the authors were obviously laboring, as well as the obstacles that we encounter as soon as we attempt to analyze the abstract terminology of some of the more important clauses. Except for the beautiful section on the Incarnation, the simple statement of Gospel facts, which characterize the Apostles’ Creed, has given way to the erection of a line of fortifications designed to ward off a renewed attack along the old lines of error. And there is certain grimness about fortifications, even when they become venerable and mellowed with age.

It might seem as though the fact noted a few moments ago, namely that our present wording of this Creed is no longer the same as that of the original version, would indicate that the lines have been breached; that precious ground has been lost. However, the Creed of 325 was never revoked. On the contrary, the Councils of Constantinople in 381, Ephesus 431, and Chalcedon, 451 solemnly reaffirmed it. This last assembly is particularly important because it gave formal approval to a version that had received its first official recognition at the earlier Council at Constantinople, 70 years before, and which can be traced back even farther.

What had happened since Nicea seems to have been about as follows: Some churches had taken over the original Nicene Creed verbatim. Others had retained their own creeds, incorporating such phrases from the former as pertained to the issues that had been settled at Nicea. Thus we find these distinctive expressions appearing for instance in the baptismal confession used by Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, who incidentally was the great catechist of his day. He did not include the anathemas against the heretical teachers, recognizing perhaps that this was not in keeping with the catechetical purpose of his creed. He did, however, amplify the article concerning the Holy Ghost, which had been cut so very short at Nicea, where the entire controversy had turned about the Second Person of the Godhead. Another bishop, Epiphanius of Salamis, seems to have followed Cyril in formulating a credal statement of his own. Since a certain Macedonius was questioning the full divinity of the Holy Ghost, even as Arius had once denied that of the Son, Epiphanius became still more specific on that point than Cyril had been. In due time the 150 Fathers of Constantinople took a stand against the heresy of Macedonius. In some way the Creed of Cyril as modified by Epiphanius was received into the record, without however being incorporated into the formal decisions of the Council. It soon met with universal favor, and Chalcedon raised it to the rank of a symbol. A careful examination of its wording shows that it has preserved the Nicene doctrine, and that the enlargement of the article concerning the Holy Ghost is in fact in full harmony with the principles for which Athanasius had stood at Nicea.

For the sake of completing the historical account it should be mentioned that an addition made by the Western Church, to the effect that the Holy Spirit “proceedeth from the Father *and the Son*” (*filioque*), was strongly opposed by the Eastern Church and became one of the main issues when the Great Schism of 1054 occurred. A sober evaluation of the controversy would indicate that the Eastern Church was technically right in objecting to the changing of an accepted article of confession without previous mutual consultation and full

consideration by the entire Church. But it was wrong in objecting to the doctrine itself, which is well substantiated in Scripture.

### III. The Athanasian Creed

The origin of the Athanasian Creed presents an entirely new set of problems to the historian. As the name indicates, tradition claims Athanasius as the author. Yet almost the only thing that is known positively about the authorship of this creed is that it was not Athanasius who wrote it. For one thing, this is a Latin Creed, of the Western Church. And although Athanasius did spend years of exile in the West, yet he never seems to have become sufficiently familiar with Latin to use it in his writings. All his known works are in Greek. Another and a decisive reason is that the controversies which are treated in the second part of this creed, concerning the relation of the divine and human natures of Christ, did not develop until several decades after this "Father of Orthodoxy" had entered into his well earned rest. The other theories that are advanced are hardly more than guesses, based on the fact that some quotations from the writings of such other hypothetical authors are similar to, or identical with certain parts of the Creed. None of these parallels is long enough to be decisive, and the evidence for one author is cancelled out by the fact that a similar parallel may be shown in favor of some other one of the Latin Fathers. As a result, modern scholars are quite cautious about such claims, although they agree that the true author is to be sought in the Western Church.

It is possible to be a little more definite as to the time when this Creed was written. Theories suggesting a date as late as the beginning of the 9th century need no longer be considered, even though among the authors whose works contain passages that resemble our creed is found the favorite theologian of Charlemagne, Paulinus of Aquileia, who died about 804. For the decrees of the Council of Autun, held in Southern France about in the year 670, include the following: "If any priest, deacon, subdeacon, or cleric does not receive the creed which has been handed down from the Apostles as inspired by the Holy Spirit *and the creed of bishop St. Athanasius without criticism*, he is to be condemned by his bishop." (Schaff-Herzog, Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, I, p. 341b). If then already tradition had become so positive about the authorship of Athanasius, it is surely justifiable to assume that at least a century must have elapsed since the creed became known, and that therefore it cannot have been written much later than about the year 550.

On the other hand, it can hardly have originated much before 451 since it presupposes the doctrinal controversies that were settled at that time. The fact is worth noting that this creed devotes considerable attention to a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, which did not stand in the foreground at this Council of Chalcedon. But it is outweighed by the other fact that it is easier to recall past events than to anticipate the future.

Furthermore, it is not hard to find a reason why this particular doctrine should have been discussed at this particular time and in this particular part of the Empire. For this is the time when the West was discovering that though Arius was dead, and his heresy outlawed in the Empire, it was still possible for Arianism to conquer. For the Germanic tribes were on their victorious marches through Gaul, Spain, Northern Africa, from where the Vandals under Geiseric advanced into Rome itself. And with them came the danger that the heresy that had been repulsed at the Church Councils might still conquer via the battle fields. What is more natural than that the men who faced these perils, Augustine in his besieged city of Hippo, and his contemporaries, and their disciples should preach their sermons on the Trinity, write their treatises on the same subject, all for the purpose of strengthening their people in the true doctrine. And what is more natural than that someone finally puts this doctrinal material into solemn creedal form, here and there perhaps in the very words of Augustine, Vincent of Lerins, Faustus of Riez, Eucherius of Lyons, Caesarius of Aries, or whomever else the scholars may list. It was just as natural that this unknown author, being of the West, should then include a statement on the problem of the one person and the natures of Christ, since after all it was Western theology which had carried the day at Chalcedon.

The chief difference between the Nicene Creed and the Trinitarian part of the Athanasian is one of emphasis. Whereas the former emphasized the full deity of the Son, and subsequently also of the Holy Ghost,

implying rather than explaining the oneness of God, the Athanasian Creed, leaving nothing to be assumed, brings in the idea of the inviolate Oneness as a sort of a triumphant refrain (3, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25b—as numbered in Conc. Trigl.). The new issues do not come into consideration until in the second part. We should know just what those issues were, whether they were of such a nature that their inclusion in a creed was warranted, and finally how these issues were decided.

It has already been said that these later controversies dealt with the problem of the person and the natures of Christ. That meant that there was no longer any disagreement as to the full divinity of that pre-existent Person, the only begotten Son. But what happened when he became man? Did the Divine Being simply take the place of the soul that dwells in the normal human body? If so, what becomes of the true humanity of our Redeemer, which makes him like unto us in all things, save sin? Or did the Incarnation mean that the heavenly Christ simply associated Himself with a natural human being who then became the earthly Christ, so that there are two separate persons, though perfectly joined together in the one great purpose and work of the Redemption? If so, which of these is the Savior to whom the sinner should turn for the salvation that is to be found with none other? Or does the Incarnation mean this that out of the union of the divine with the human there resulted a Being which was indeed more than man, but less than God, an intermediate, third kind of being? If so, what hope is there in a Savior who is neither true God nor true man?

Apollinaris of Laodicea taught the first of these views. Athanasius still had a hand in exposing that error. Nestorius and his followers advocated the second theory of the two Christs who are joined in their purpose and work. It was difficult to cope with, since in insisting on the true humanity of our Lord it emphasized a certain truth. And yet it created a divided Christ, and depriving the Savior's sacrifice of the very element that gave it its value, namely that God's Son was bearing our sins. The error was exposed and condemned at the Council of Ephesus, 431. The very fact that this was done made it harder to expose the fallacy of the doctrine of the single, but intermediate and hybrid nature of the Savior, which quite naturally came to be called Monophysitism. Yet the fact that it violated the true quality of both the humanity and the divinity of the Redeemer was soon recognized in its dangerous implications, and this error was also exposed, this time at Chalcedon. Because each of these departures from the true teachings of Scripture touched upon the article of our redemption, undermining the believer's assurance of salvation, it certainly warranted the calling of councils, as well as inclusion in the formal creeds of the church. We have every reason to be grateful for the decisions of Chalcedon. They are sharp, clear, and consistent with Biblical truth. Against the idea of the one intermediate, hybrid nature, in which each of the original natures undergoes some change, that Council placed the terms "Inconfusedly, unchangeably." Against the idea of resolving the person of the Savior into two Christs it placed the words "indivisibly, inseparably." The Redeemer is described as true God, and also true man, these two natures being perfectly joined together in one undivided person. The entire Creed of Chalcedon reads as follows:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, but without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*, the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us. (Schaff; Creeds of Christendom: p. 62)

Comparison with the Athanasian Creed will show that the substance of this teaching is there also. We have every reason to be grateful for the preservation of these truths. One notices that the formulation is more moderate. But even so, the words of the Athanasian Creed are still the terminology of controversy, of severe strife, of a stern decision. The anathemas do not permit one to forget this. The terms still have a highly abstract nature. Again one notes the attempt to define the indefinable. We sense once more how different this all is from the simple confessing of Gospel truths, which we have in the Apostles' Creed.