

Articulation and Affirmation of Our Faith Lesson 1

Reformers

The date that the Reformation began is generally considered to be October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Thesis on the door of Castle Church Wittenberg.

The Protestant Reformed tradition began in Switzerland with Ulrich Zwingli at about that same time. It spread to Eastern Europe and up the Rhine to the low-countries and made its way into Scotland and England.

The term "Reformed" is attributed to Queen Elizabeth. Because of the emphasis on simplicity of worship and discipline in public life, the Queen announced that the Swiss were more "reformed" than the Lutherans.

Luther was content to reject medieval doctrine, worship, or life which seemed inconsistent with the Word of God.

Zwingli, Calvin and other Swiss Reformers took an opposite approach. They wanted to reform all of life in the church and in the world so that people would live a life style based on Scripture – personal and civic.

The word "Reformed" refers to one branch of the Protestant reformation movement, which had a particular locale and history and which developed some distinctive theological emphases.

Reformed and Always Reforming

Presbyterians hold two values in tension. One is the freedom of individual conscience, the other is the integrity of the community standard.

G-1.0301 Right of Judgment

(1) (a) That "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men⁴ which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."

(b) Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment,

in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.

Yet we hold that there are essential tenets, or beliefs. The *Book of Order* declares that the creeds and confession of the church identify us as a community, guide us in studying the Scripture, and summarize the essence of the Christian tradition. Thus the confessions equip us for the task of proclaiming the good news.

There are ten that are considered “more essential” than others. The first two are shared by the church catholic, the next two are affirmations of the Protestant Reformation and the last six are essential to express the faith of the Reformation tradition:

1. the mystery of the Trinity
2. the incarnation of the eternal Word of God
3. justification by grace through faith
4. Scripture as the final authority for salvation and the life of faith
5. God’s sovereignty
6. God’s choosing (election) of people for salvation and service
7. the covenant life of the church
8. ordering itself according to the Word of God
9. faithful stewardship
10. sin of idolatry

Limits

Not everything in the confessions have “equal” weight. It is necessary that we discern the central motifs and differentiate them from the details which are related only to the cultural setting and theological situation of that particular time and place.

For example:

3.22 The Right Administration of the Sacraments

Two things are necessary for the right administration of the sacraments. The first is that they should be ministered by lawful ministers, and we declare that these are men appointed to preach the Word, unto whom God has given the power to preach the gospel, and who are lawfully called by some Kirk. The second is that they should be ministered in the elements and manner which God has appointed.

Otherwise they cease to be the sacraments of Christ Jesus. This is why we abandon the teaching of the Roman Church and withdraw from its sacraments; firstly, because their ministers are not true ministers of Christ Jesus (indeed they even allow women, whom the Holy Ghost will not permit to preach in the congregation to baptize) and, secondly, because they have so adulterated both the sacraments with their own additions that no part of Christ's original act remains in its original simplicity. The addition of oil, salt, spittle, and such like in baptism, are merely human additions. To adore or venerate the sacrament, to carry it through streets and towns in procession, or to reserve it in a special case, is not the proper use of Christ's sacrament but an abuse of it...

Doctrine and Dogma

When we state the meaning of a biblical idea we have created a doctrine. Doctrine comes from the Latin word *doctrina*, which means the content of what is taught. The "doctrine of God" would be the teachings of all things about God.

Dogma is from the Greek and is translated "that which seems good." Religiously, the word dogma was used to apply to a doctrine which had been formulated by some authoritative ecclesiastical body, like a church council, and which had been declared by that body to rest upon divine authority. The councils of Nicaea (c. AD 325) and Constantinople (c. AD 381). The Nicene Creed was derived from statements of the two councils.

The purpose of creeds and confessions are two fold:

1. for the instruction of new converts in the Christian faith.
2. for authentic and authoritative statements of belief.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,

true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

In the first three centuries, the church found itself in a hostile environment. On the one hand, it grappled with the challenge of relating the language of the gospel, developed in a Hebraic and Jewish-Christian context, to a Graeco-Roman world. On the other hand, it was threatened not only by persecution, but also by ideas that were in conflict with the biblical witness.

In A.D. 312, Constantine won control of the Roman Empire in the battle of Milvian Bridge. Attributing his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ, he elevated Christianity to favored status in the empire. "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor" became his motto.

The new emperor soon discovered that "one faith and one church" were fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicting understandings of the nature of Christ, long a point of controversy.

Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, asserted that the divine Christ, the Word through whom all things have their existence, was *created* by God before the beginning of time. Therefore, the divinity of Christ was similar to the divinity of God, but not of the same essence. Arius was opposed by the bishop, Alexander, together with his associate and successor, Athanasius. They affirmed that the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father. To hold otherwise, they said, was to open the possibility of polytheism, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.

To counter a widening rift within the church, Constantine convened a council in Nicaea in A.D. 325. A creed reflecting the position of Alexander and Athanasius was written and signed by a majority of the bishops. Nevertheless, the two parties continued to battle each other. In 381, a second council met in Constantinople. It adopted a revised and expanded form of the A.D. 325 creed, now known as the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of creeds. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) joins with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches in affirming it. Nevertheless, in contrast to Eastern Orthodox churches, the western churches state that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but from the Father *and the Son* (Latin, *filioque*). To the eastern churches, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son threatens the distinctiveness of the person of the Holy Spirit; to the western churches, the *filioque* guards the unity of the triune God. This issue remains unresolved in the ecumenical dialogue.

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