Book of Confessions
Study Edition
Revised

[Part I of the Constitution
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)]

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Contents

Foreword by the Publisher

Westminster John Knox Press is proud to publish this study edition of the *Book of Confessions* as a service to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The volume brings together the official texts of the twelve confessional documents that together form Part I of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* and introductory essays that provide historical and theological background for each of these documents. The twelve documents are:

The Nicene Creed
The Apostles' Creed
The Scots Confession
The Heidelberg Catechism
The Second Helvetic Confession
The Westminster Standards
  The Westminster Confession of Faith
  The Shorter Catechism
  The Larger Catechism
The Theological Declaration of Barmen
The Confession of 1967
The Confession of Belhar
A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In addition to these documents, two more texts are included that are not constitutional documents but which the General Assembly has mandated to be published with the *Book of Confessions*: "The Confessional Nature of the Church" and "The Assessment of Proposed Amendments to the *Book of Confessions*."

The introductory essays are designed to encourage study and understanding of the confessional documents and are not, of course, official constitutional texts themselves. These essays were written by outstanding Presbyterian scholars, but they are unsigned both because of the character of this book as a

reference volume and study resource and because the spotlight in this volume falls on the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the Presbyterian Church rather than on the persons writing about them.

We hope that this volume will provide new understanding of and appreciation for the rich confessional heritage of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and will support careful study of the church's confessional documents by seminary students, ministers, church leaders, and all Christians. Moreover, we hope that this book will stimulate deeper curiosity about the history and theology of the confessions, prompting readers to seek out many other fine interpretations of the creeds, confessions, and catechisms readily available in theological libraries. Most of all, however, we hope that the *Book of Confessions: Study Edition, Revised* will help all who explore the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to understand the Christian faith more truly.

The Nicene Creed

Introduction

The Nicene Creed was the first and in fact is the only creed used ecumenically by the vast majority of Christians throughout the world. For more than fifteen hundred years, it has been the hallmark of orthodoxy. Before Nicaea, churches in various regions had baptismal confessions that agreed with each other on all major points. The wording differed, however, and few had any detail as to how the various points confessed were to be understood. But the Nicene Creed, the product of two councils—Nicaea in 325 CE and Constantinople in 381 CE—was carefully worded, geared to explain the matters in dispute. With the exception of one phrase, a later addition in the West, the careful wording of Nicaea has remained constant. In that sense it is a creed.

What were the issues or problems that led to the calling of the Council of Nicaea? In order to understand what this creed is responding to we need to put ourselves back in that time and place. Once we do that, however, we will see that the issues dealt with then remain issues with which the church must deal in every time and place.

The year was 325 CE. It was but a few years after the emperor Constantine had eliminated all rivals and alone ruled the vast Roman Empire that surrounded the entirety of the Mediterranean Sea. He had shown great favor to the Christian church,

ending all persecution. That persecution had been the most severe just before Constantine's climb to power. After his victory, he and his mother gave money for the construction of churches where Christians could worship openly and in peace. Although he was not yet baptized and still attended state functions Christians considered idolatrous, it was clear to everyone that Constantine supported the Christian church more than any other religious institution of the day, including the traditional forms of the Roman Empire. His mother was a baptized and practicing Christian.

Furthermore, the church was a young and vibrant movement with a network of bishops and congregations coextensive with the empire itself and growing rapidly. Evidently the emperor hoped that if it became the dominant religion, then perhaps it could unify the disparate areas and peoples. For this reason, when Constantine discovered that there was a threat to the unity of the church, he worked to eliminate the dissension. He himself called a council of all the bishops to discuss the issue in dispute and come to a decision as to the truth the whole church should believe. The imperial post carried the invitations, and the emperor provided the hospitality for the gathering. During the time of persecution but a few years earlier, a meeting of this scale would have been impossible for the church to arrange.

More than three hundred bishops, mostly from the eastern area of the empire, came to Nicaea, today a small town in Turkey, a few miles southeast of Istanbul across the Bosporus. At that time it was the residence of Constantine while he awaited the completion of his new capital city, Constantinople, the name it had until the Turks changed it to Istanbul after their conquest of the area in 1453.

EARLIER PROBLEMS

What was the issue that was dividing the church? To understand this, we will need to go back briefly to an even earlier time in the church. When Christians began to be a noticeable group in some of the major cities of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, they were asked questions they sometimes found difficult to answer. There were two questions in particular: First,

How could Christians consider themselves monotheists and yet hold that both the God of Israel and Jesus are divine? Didn't that make two gods? Second, How can Christians use the Hebrew Scriptures as their holy book and yet disagree with the Jews on how it is to be interpreted? Christians found texts that pointed to Jesus, but Jews did not understand them in the same way. Whom should Greeks believe? The Jews had had much more time and history with these writings, so their opinion seemed more probable.

We should not think that these questions were simply posed to one Christian by a neighbor in private. Surely that happened. But debates also occurred in the city square, especially during times when there was little or no persecution. The debates were public, with representatives of different "philosophies"—not only Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, and so forth, but also Jews and Christians. All these groups were mostly urban and accustomed to such debates (See Paul's invitation to participate in such a forum in Acts 17:16–21.) These latter two were considered philosophies because their teachings were for the purpose of showing how to live well, meaningfully, virtuously. What beliefs and practices led to such a life? Forms of worship were not the major concern, and therefore the traditional Greek and Roman cults were not part of the debates. Both Christians and Jews believed in one God, who had a certain character, who desired a certain style of life on the part of adherents.

Already in the second century, some who called themselves Christians had answered the questions posed to Christians very simply: The God of ancient Israel has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Christians should not use the Old Testament. The church quickly said that that was contrary to the gospel. So the debates would be with those who held to the Old Testament as well as the gospel, and who believed that the God of Israel is indeed the God of Jesus Christ.

That left the more difficult question of monotheism. Christians were convinced that they were indeed monotheists. There was only one God: the God of ancient Israel. At the same time, the center of the gospel was that this God had visited the people in an act of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus was God incarnate. The baptismal confessions held this, the writings of Paul and the Gospels held to it. How can this be understood?

An attempt had been made in the early third century that, for some, seemed to answer the question satisfactorily. It said that God had different modes of being God, even as water can be a liquid, or a vapor, or a solid. First God was "the Father," the creator of all things that the baptismal confessions held to. After paving the way in the ancient nation of Israel, God ceased to be "the Father" and became "the Son." This was Jesus, who was born, lived among us, was crucified, died, and rose again. But the resurrection began a new mode of God, "the Holy Spirit." So Jesus is God, the Holy Spirit is God, as is the God of Israel. All are the same God, but only in one mode at a time, in sequence, with no return to earlier modes. This understanding is known as modalism, or Sabellianism. It is monotheistic, since there is only one mode at a time, but the majority of the church found such a view seriously flawed. In fact, it created more problems than it solved. Above all, if Jesus really died, as the church clearly confessed, does that mean that God died? And to whom did Jesus pray? If Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit," how could that have been when God was still in the first mode?

Though modalism had generally been rejected by the churches throughout the empire, it still was a temptingly easy solution for many questions about monotheism, and it remained a threat in the life of the church. The significance of this background will become clearer after we deal with Nicaea itself.

ARIUS

Now we come to the time of Constantine. In Alexandria, a young, well-educated presbyter named Arius began to teach his own understanding of how the One who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth was related to the God of Israel. Arius was well trained in Greek philosophy, and much of this influenced his theology. His concern was not the issue of monotheism. Rather, for him, the true God, the God of ancient Israel, could not be directly involved in the transient, changing world of creation. Greek philosophy considered the highest reality to be unchanging, eternally fixed. Any change would mean less than perfection. Therefore, for him the question was how this unchanging God could be involved in this constantly changing, clearly finite

world. (It should be noted that the biblical perspective has no such question, but assumes that God created the world and continues to be involved with it, and was not less than true God in doing so. Arius's view shows the influence of Greek Platonism.) He solved the problem by holding that this high, true God had created an agent, divine to be sure, but a lesser being than God, through whom to create and interact with the finite, changing world. This agent is God's first creation, and is called the Word or Logos or Son. When the created world fell into sin, it was this Word, or Logos, who became incarnate in order to save it. Therefore, the one who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth is not the high God, but this divine agent, this created divinity, who is above all the rest of creation, but nonetheless, a creature.

For the philosophically inclined, this was an interesting view, and solved the problem that Platonic philosophy had with a God who constantly interacted with this changing world. But for those who were steeped in the church tradition more than in philosophy, Arius's view seriously compromised the monotheism to which the church was thoroughly committed. Arius's bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, therefore excommunicated this presbyter who was a teacher in Alexandria. The followers of Arius, most of whom were not in Alexandria but in the area around Antioch, still supported him. This is what caused the division that concerned the emperor Constantine. Constantine was not particularly interested in the particularities of theology, but he did want a united church throughout the empire. When it became obvious that this was a serious division, he called a council of all the bishops to meet in Nicaea in 325 CE. More than three hundred bishops attended—by no means all the bishops—but only a few from the western, Latin-speaking area of the church attended, because neither Platonic philosophy nor Arius's teachings had made many followers in the West; so the bishops were not concerned with the debate. They were also much farther from Nicaea and the influence of the emperor.

When the discussion at Nicaea began, the emperor himself presided. He did not presume to determine the decision of the council, but he did intend to enforce whatever decision the council made. The bishops in attendance included very few who actually supported Arius. (He was not a bishop and therefore could not address the assembly.) There were a few who really

understood the issues and opposed Arius. Most were not really clear what Arius taught. Arius's opinion was clearly given by a bishop who agreed with him. At that point, many of the bishops who had not understood the issue before realized how distant Arius's teaching was from the faith the church professed. They therefore condemned his teachings. However, the opposition to Arius had to be couched in the philosophical language that Arius used and not simply in the biblical language with which the majority of bishops were far more familiar.

The creedal statement made very clear that the One who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth—the Word or Logos or Son—was no creature, no lesser divinity. Rather he is "God of God," "Light of Light," "of the same substance as the Father."

The term "being of one substance with the Father"—in the Greek, *homoousios to patri*—is the critical point. For us, the terms "father" and "son" appear to imply a generation gap. Of course the father is before the son, earlier than the son in time. This is not what the creed means. In fact, it assumes that there never is a time when the Father exists without the Son. Rather, the creed is dealing with a very different issue. Our knowledge of human reproduction is very different from theirs, but if we were to put into contemporary language what Nicaea is saying, we could state that the Son, the Word, is of the same genetic material as the Father. Just as a human father produces a human child and not some other species, so the Son of God is of the same divinity as the Father, not a lesser form, not a creature. Human beings can create or make a painting or some other object totally different from themselves. But a child is not a creation in the same sense. It is of the same species, the same form, the same thing as the parent. For this reason the creed states that the Son is "begotten not made." He is not a creature as are all others. It is this Son, the only-begotten, who then, for our sake, became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

Furthermore, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that there was any awareness that the mother provided anything other than "matter." The ancients believed that just as the farmer plants all sorts of different seeds in the same ground, and it is the seed not the ground that determines what grows, the mother was like the ground, and the seed of the father determined what was produced. The gender-specific language was

therefore part of the argument for them in a way that it would not be for us. The Son, or Word of God, is God, just as much as the Father is God. The analogy from human relationships was important. This was the statement against Arius and was effective in opposing his teaching.

The council closed, declaring the sections on the Father and the Son of the creed we know in the form we know it. However, they added only the beginning of the section on the Holy Spirit, declaring only that they believed in the Holy Spirit. They included a list of "anathemas," statements of what was not to be believed.

The council may have solved the problem of Arius, but it soon became clear that many of the faithful in the church did not like the creed at all, not because they favored Arius, but because the way the creed was stated, it appeared to legitimate Sabellianism. If the Son was of the same substance as the Father, with no distinction, then the Father could become the Son and then the Spirit with no difficulty at all. The creed was therefore not well accepted. In addition, although Constantine had exiled those bishops and Arius who did not agree with the decision of Nicaea, eventually he changed his mind, and exiled those bishops who did not agree with an Arian confession. This confusion lasted for several years. Several suggestions were made, including using the Greek term *homoiousios* instead of *homoousios*, indicating that the Son was of a substance similar to the Father but not the same. That would have eliminated a Sabellian reading of the creed but would have left the door open again for Arianism (the teachings of Arius).

It took another generation, with serious work on the part of several bishop-theologians, to find agreement to the language of Nicaea so that Arianism was condemned while still condemning Sabellian modalism. The language of the creed did not change, but the understanding did. Another council was called—by a later emperor—in 381 in the city of Constantinople. There the creed of Nicaea was reaffirmed, and a third paragraph was added, filling out what is believed concerning the Holy Spirit. The anathemas were also dropped.

Only one change has occurred since 381, and that only in the West. A century or so after the Council of Constantinople, Christians in Spain added the phrase that the Holy Spirit "proceeds

from the Father and the Son." Before that, the creed said only that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. They added this in order to deal with a particular heresy that was local to Spain. Around the year 800, western missionaries in Eastern Europe discovered that the Greek-speaking church did not use this phrase. They therefore labeled the Greeks heretics, unaware that the Greeks were using the original form of the creed. It is not clear whether theological or political struggles raised this issue to great heights, eventually leading to the split between the Greek and Latin churches—the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. The Eastern church was furious that a creed, carefully worked out by a council of the whole church, could be altered by a part of that church, with no council involving the Eastern church. The West assumed they had such a right, especially in the office of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The discussion, and the division, continues to the present day on this phrase in the creed.

Though Constantine called the council for his own purposes, the church clearly stated its view that Jesus is indeed God—not a second, lesser god—making clear that there is only one God. Though they used language and analogies that need to be clarified for a contemporary audience, the decisions they made remain the bedrock of our faith. The fact that the decision was eventually confirmed by the whole church in spite of all the difficulties on the way to the Council of Constantinople shows that though emperors called councils, it was bishops who knew and loved the gospel who finally made the decisions.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. What do you think of the debate between East and West on the phrase about the Spirit proceeding from the Father *and the Son*? This is an ecumenical issue of significant proportions. Is our faith something limited to our congregation or even our denomination? To what degree do we confess the faith of the whole church, far wider than our own denominational family? We use the Nicene Creed in our denomination. How free should we be to alter decisions made by far wider expressions of the church?

2. How likely are contemporary Christians to hold beliefs similar to those of Arius? When we say Jesus is the Son of God, what do we mean? How do we explain this in modern language without denying the monotheism that is basic to the church's faith?

THE NICENE CREED

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

1.2 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.

1.3 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.