



The Story of Creeds and Confessions

Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith



Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves

The Story of Creeds and Confessions

Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith

Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves


Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Preface ix

Abbreviations xi

1. Beginning the Story 1

Part 1 The Era of the Creeds (100–500)

2. The Creedal Impulse in Scripture and the Early Church 19

3. A Christian Empire and Creedal Standardization 38

4. The Nicene Creed: *A Creed for the Entire Church* 48

5. The Chalcedonian Definition: *Explaining the Nicene Creed:* 80

6. The Apostles' Creed: *A Regional Creed with Traditional Authority* 109

7. The Athanasian Creed: *A Creedal Anomaly with Staying Power* 126

Part 2 Exploring Creedal Theology (500–900)

8. Clarifying Chalcedon in the East 143

9. The West Charts Its Own Theological Course 160

10. Creedal Dissension and the East-West Schism 176

Part 3 From Creeds to Confessions in the West (900–1500)

11. Setting the Stage for Medieval Developments 195

12. Catholic Confessions in the High Middle Ages 211

Part 4 The Reformation and Confessionalism (1500–1650)

- 13. The Crisis of the Reformation 231
- 14. Early Protestant Confessions 247
- 15. New Generations of Protestant Confessions 275
- 16. Catholic and Orthodox Responses to Protestant Confessions 309
- 17. Protestant Confessions in the Late Reformation 324

Part 5 Confessions in the Modern World (1650–Present)

- 18. The New Grammar of Modern Confessions 361

Conclusion 385

Index 389

1

Beginning the Story

At the very heart of the Christian faith lies not an ethical system (as important as that is), nor a set of commandments (although there are many of those), nor even a set of doctrines (although they, too, are very important), but a *name*. Peter tells the Jewish leaders, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Following Jesus’s command, new Christians are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Indeed, by calling ourselves Christians, we are naming ourselves after Christ, our Lord. The most important thing about us is not what we do, or even what we believe *per se*, but to whom we belong as shown by the one whose name we bear.

Furthermore, the one to whom we belong is also the one *in whom we believe*. Paul writes to the Romans, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). This simple statement includes a fact that we believe—God raised Jesus from the dead—but even more fundamental is its confession of who this Jesus whom God raised from the dead was. He was and is the Lord. Therefore, at the most basic level, being Christian involves confessing who Jesus Christ is in relation to God, affirming that we belong to him because we bear his name, and believing the fundamental truths of his history—his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. What we do grows out of what we confess, which grows out of the one to whom we belong and in whom we believe, the one by whose name we are called. As a result, throughout Christian history, believers have sought to articulate in summary

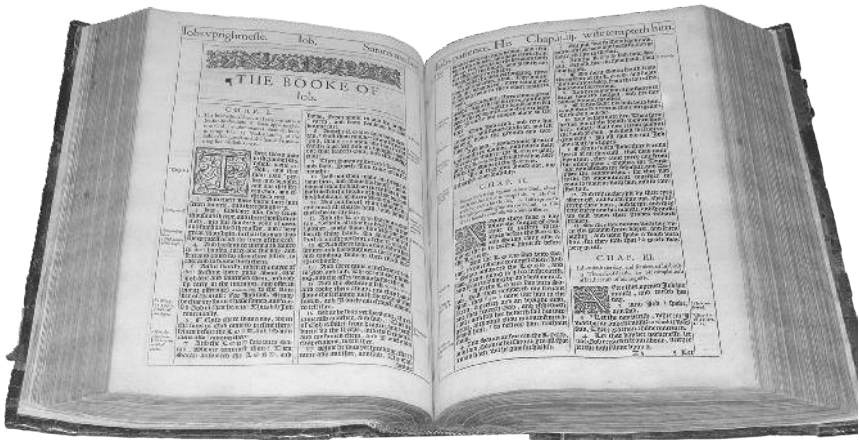
statements—creeds and confessions—the one in whom we believe, what we believe about him and ourselves, and what the implications of our faith in him are. The story of creeds and confessions is an account of these efforts on the part of Christians. As such, this story is an integral part of the story of Christianity more generally.

Why Should We Care about Creeds and Confessions from the Past?

Before we even begin such a story, however, we as twenty-first-century Christians in the West need to acknowledge that we have a problem. Creeds and confessions contain language that doesn't come from the Bible. Many of us proudly—and correctly—affirm our allegiance to Scripture alone as the ultimate authority for our faith. Why then should we use any language other than the Bible's own words to describe that faith? And not only do creeds and confessions come from elsewhere than the Bible, but they also are other people's articulations of our faith. Why would we want to dredge up dusty language from the distant past rather than speak of Jesus ourselves, in our own way?

These are good questions, and taken together they drive stakes into the ground to delineate two major features of Western (especially American) Protestant Christianity: biblicism and individualism. "I have no creed but the Bible," we often say. This statement carries with it good intentions to stick to the Bible and avoid the blind adoption of merely human ideas. We have elevated to iconic status the rugged individual who questions authority wherever he or she finds it. An ideal man or woman of faith, we insist, is a critical thinker, an unsubmitive student, who questions the ideas of the past and engages directly (and perhaps exclusively) with the Bible in order to deepen his or her faith. Our romantic model is the frontier woman or man reading the Bible alone—one person reading only one book—grasping its truth and speaking of Jesus using the words of Scripture. With such a model before us, what need do we have of creeds or confessions—or of a book that tells their story?

To address this issue, we need to go back to the assertion with which we began this chapter. Christianity is about a name. As Christians, we proclaim the name of the person to whom we belong, in whom we believe. Our life revolves around the joyous task of knowing this person whom we name and of speaking about him. Indeed, knowing and speaking are closely related. We have to *get to know* someone in order to *know* that person. We have to *learn to speak* in order to *talk*. When we first come to know Jesus, we know



© Baker Publishing Group and Dr. James C. Martin, Sola Scriptura.

Do we need creeds or confessions? Or is the Bible all we need?

something about him, and we can say something. We may be prone to misplace our words, to speak haltingly or without confidence, or to speak too confidently without balance or accuracy. But we can speak of him—there is no Christian who has nothing to say about Jesus. However, to speak *well* of Jesus, we have to get to know him—through his Word, through prayer, through fellowship with other believers.

Getting to know Christ is akin to getting to know one's husband or wife. Any who have married can confess that they did not marry the person they thought they did. The ecstasy of the honeymoon doesn't change the fact that you wake up with a virtual stranger. You may be one flesh, but you are hardly one heart, one mind—at least not yet. And now that stranger is never going away! Our faith follows a similar path. We accept the embrace of Christ and the covenant in his blood; we are washed, anointed, and brimming with the joy of his peace. But we hardly know him—how could we? We were just recently rebels, far off, forsaking his gospel and forging our own way in this world. How can we really know him at the very beginning of Christian life? Over time, though, we get to know him as we get to know a spouse, and we can speak of him with an intimacy similar to the way we might speak of a spouse after many years of marriage.

In order to speak well, however, we need more than intimacy, more than “getting to know.” We also need what could be called a grammar. Children must pick up the grammar of their native language, and before they do so, their expressions of love and relationship are clumsy and their words to describe love even clumsier (however charming!). So, too, Christians must learn

the grammar of Christian intimacy, the grammar of relationships described through a Christian lens, the grammar of living in light of the one whose name we bear. We learn this grammar, first and foremost, from Scripture. But to learn it only from Scripture is akin to being handed the complete works of Shakespeare and being asked to describe the English language therefrom. Everything is in that massive volume—all the beautiful turns of phrase, the precision, balance, and elegance of which the language is capable in the hands of perhaps its greatest writer. But most of us could use a guide to help us navigate—let alone explain—the riches of Shakespeare’s English. Similarly, most of us could use a guide to navigate the riches of Scripture—not as a replacement for Scripture, but as a brief summary that can help us find our way around and talk about what we are reading and experiencing. We affirm that the Bible stands alone as our ultimate authority, but if we are honest, we’ll likely admit that we need some help with the Bible, in much the same way that we need some help with Shakespeare. Creeds and confessions—the grammar of the Christian faith provided for us by the church of the past—can help us to speak well of Jesus, whose name we bear.

There is yet another reason why many of us may object to the use of creeds and confessions. In contemporary English, the word “creed” often refers to a political allegiance or a general worldview. It usually has negative connotations, as if the act of holding to a creed makes one intolerant, in contrast to those who accept everyone regardless of race, gender, or creed. Well-meaning Christians, thinking of “creed” in this sense, proudly claim no creed but Jesus. And the word “confession” sounds even worse to contemporary ears, with connotations that we need to apologize for what we confess, or that we confess only when we have been placed in a situation where we have no choice.¹

A look at the original sense of the word “creed” can help us overcome these negative connotations and see the value of giving attention to creeds and confessions. The Greek word used in the early church for a creed was *symbolon*, from which we get the English word “symbol.” A *symbolon*, in the most basic use of the word, was a combination of two pieces placed side by side, allowing a person to verify one piece because it matched the second piece.² Think of a painting or tapestry, cut into two pieces, which are then verified by placing them back together again to show that they line up. We know that one piece is authentic because it matches the second. Nothing

1. For a discussion of several related reasons for an anticreedal bias in much contemporary Protestantism, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 21–49.

2. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1843 [9th ed. 1940, supplement added 1996]), 1676.

better describes the relationship between personal faith and ancient creeds: we have faith in Christ, but we must verify that we have not invented Christ according to our own fantasies. It is as if the authors of creeds and confessions are saying to us, “Come and lay your faith down next to this pattern and see whether the images match, or whether they reveal a fundamental difference between your impressions and the faith of our fathers. Should these images differ, then reflect, struggle against the parameters of the faith to see whether there is something to be learned.”

The writers of creeds and confessions did not envision that we could quickly grasp every facet of the creed in one reading—as if the faith could be swallowed in one gulp and the bones of heresy spat out. Instead, creeds are, to recast a romantic phrase, *living documents*—not because they adapt to fit our changing attitudes, but because our attitudes must always be checked against their original design. Creeds, as symbols, instruct us in the design of our theological house; they are like blueprints. Imagine us, as contemporary builders, laying a foundation for rooms that, once built, will make the house unlivable because we proudly proclaim that we have no need of blueprints!

Creeds and confessions were not meant to be comprehensive, at least not comprehensive in the sense that all subsequent discussion became moot.³ Christians over the centuries never shared our modern desire to explain everything all at once, even in the context of a lengthy confession. Their intention was to give Christians a guide, a blueprint—the second half of the *symbolon*—so that we might avoid the many pitfalls of those who too hastily attempted to explain Christ in their own words. And so creeds and confessions were pressed into service against a staggering variety of theological problems. The impulse of the church to write down its grammar sprang partly from the fact that some Christians, in their zeal to emphasize a certain facet of theology, had adopted views of God or Christ that were closer to their own imaginations than to the Scriptures. Far from being a means to depart from the Bible, creeds and confessions served to warn of the danger of straying from Scripture.

But the original design of a creed or confession, even if clear, still needs interpretation and explanation today. Creeds are composed of words used to encapsulate the biblical drama, just as we do when we choose to boil the essence of the gospel message down to a single concept such as grace, kingdom, evangel, salvation. There is nothing wrong with doing this, but such words demand an explanation. Imagine a pastor, in answering questions

3. As we will see in part 4, confessions often were not designed to cover each topic, and even if they did treat most topics, they did not cover them exhaustively.

about the faith, simply placing a Bible in our hands and saying, “This is our faith.” There is nothing wrong with the pastor’s motives—the Scriptures are the source of our faith, and we will do wonders for our faith if we begin a lifetime of exploration in the Old and New Testaments. But it would be a dereliction of duty if the pastor *never* helped us understand anything other than the individual passages of Scripture. He or she would have no justification either for preaching, counseling, teaching, exhorting, and so on—all of which require a pastor to gather and to apply the biblical faith rather than simply to read and preach the Bible passage by passage.

We gather our faith so as to explain it in shorthand all the time, and so do the creeds and confessions. We use language for our faith that is not found in the Bible, and so do the creeds. Like the writers of creeds, we understand that the Scriptures are meant to shape our language about Christ and his kingdom, how they relate to the covenant of the Old Testament, and how we serve the Lord from the cross until the final resurrection. Creeds and confessions can thus be an indispensable aid in helping us draw near to the Scriptures, draw near to the Jesus of the Scriptures whose name we bear, and speak well of him. They are worthy of our attention.

The Chronology of Creeds and Confessions

While the effort to confess in whom and what we believe has gone on throughout the entire two millennia of Christian history, that effort has been concentrated in two major time periods. The first is what we call the patristic period, the several hundred years after the end of the New Testament. The word “patristic” comes from the Latin word for “father,” and the great Christian thinkers who articulated and reflected on the Christian faith in the centuries after Christ are collectively known as the church fathers. The patristic period began about AD 100, and scholars give varying dates for its close. For purposes of this book, we consider the patristic period—what we call the era of the creeds—to have extended until about 500, by which time all the ancient creeds were either in or near their final form.

The second period of intense confessional activity was the time of the Reformation. This period began in the early sixteenth century, and Martin Luther’s alleged nailing of his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, serves as a nice symbolic starting point.⁴ A convenient ending date for the Reformation is 1647, after

4. We write “alleged” because there is some dispute about whether and how this event actually happened. See our discussion in chap. 13.

the last of the great Reformation-era confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith, was ratified. Using round numbers, we consider the Reformation period to extend from around 1500 to 1650.

As a result, the chronological arrangement of this book is as follows: Part 1 deals with the ancient creeds and covers approximately the years 100–500. Part 2 deals with the way both the East and the West explored the theology of the creeds, as well as the role of creeds in the split between East and West. It thus covers the period of roughly 500–900. Part 3 turns to medieval Europe and concerns the movement from creedal to confessional theology in the period 900–1500. Part 4 considers the Reformation from 1500 to 1650, and the writing of the great confessions by Protestants, as well as the reactions from Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. Finally, part 5 deals with confession writing in the modern world, from 1650 to the present but especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, again dealing with all three branches of the church. Because creed writing was concentrated in the patristic period, and confession writing occurred principally at the time of the Reformation, parts 1 and 4 are by far the longest.

Creeds versus Confessions: What's the Difference?

At this point one may well ask what the difference is between a creed and a confession, if both of them aim to articulate the Christian faith in summary form. The simple answer to this question, an answer that is by no means wrong, is that a creed is a summary statement written early in Christian history, and a confession is a summary statement written later in Christian history. Hence we have patristic creeds but Reformation-era confessions (or, for that matter, medieval or modern confessions). Beneath this obvious difference, though, is a much more fundamental one. Creeds are short statements (rarely composed of more than a couple dozen lines), they always focus on the Trinity, and they are designed with fixed wording so that they can be used in a liturgical context.⁵ In contrast, confessions are almost always longer (usually several dozen paragraphs in length, and sometimes much longer than that), and while they reaffirm the great trinitarian statements of the creeds, they usually expend most of their ink on issues that *derive* from our faith in the Trinity. For example, the church and the sacraments get a lot of press in the

5. Recent scholarship has shown that the main difference between a creed and a rule of faith in the early church was that the former was meant to be used liturgically. See Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, *Instrumenta patristica et medievalia* 43 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 37–39.

Protestant confessions, even though those issues receive only brief mention in the creeds, which are dominated by the Trinity.

When we look at creeds and confessions this way, we can understand why the creeds were produced during the patristic period and the confessions only later. We have already seen that the most fundamental aspect of Christian faith is the name of the one to whom we belong. Since that is the case, the first task for the great Christian thinkers who articulated our faith was to summarize and explain the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Statements organized around and focused on the three persons thus arose very early in Christian history. These statements then became the basis for longer statements treating other aspects of the faith that derive from the name. Thus, short summaries of the one in whom we believe naturally preceded and led to longer statements about what we believe. Creeds came first, and confessions built on them.⁶ This fact not only explains the chronological distinction between creeds and confessions; it also provides the rationale for linking them in a single book such as this one.

There is another distinction between creeds and confessions that is closely related: the distinction between local and universal statements. At one level, all theological statements are local. That is, all such statements are influenced by the particular situation in which they arise and the particular problems they address. This is true of the biblical writings themselves, which is why we insist on “context, context, context” as we interpret the texts. It is also true of every other writing produced in human history. The specific context affects the way the ideas are presented. Thus, even the early creeds were local and contextual. There were particular purposes (such as baptism) for which the creeds were written, and there were specific problems or mistakes (heresies, if you will) against which the creeds tried to guard. A creed might be written in, say, Antioch, without any direct attention to what another creed from Rome said. But as we will see, over time creeds became standardized, and the very fact that they all focused on the Trinity meant that they *could be* standardized and gain a high degree of similarity. In addition to this “accidental” commonality, the fourth century saw a deliberate movement toward standardizing and universalizing the creeds. As a result, the creeds that we are familiar with today have been agreed on by a wide swath of the Christian church. They are univer-

6. This does not mean that the church fathers never made confession-like statements. They did indicate what they believed about the Bible, the church, and so on in their theological writings. But when it came time to confess their faith communally and succinctly, they did so by focusing on the persons of the Trinity, in whom they believed, not by writing longer works focused on what they believed—akin to later confessions.

sal in character, even though we should not forget their local, contextual origins.

In contrast, confessions were local through and through. They were obviously prompted by and speaking to particular situations. Their organizational arrangement tended to follow the issues of their day and place, and the allocation of space was dominated by the issues that were most controversial, not by the issues that were and are most fundamental (which often were largely assumed). As a result, rarely did a given confession gain recognition and acceptance by a wider swath of Christendom than by the group that gave birth to it. There are Anglican confessions, Reformed confessions, Methodist confessions, even Baptist confessions, although many Baptists today tend to shy away from nonbiblical documents such as creeds or confessions. For that matter, there are Catholic confessions and Eastern Orthodox confessions. And while Christians might profit a great deal from reading confessions from a group different from their own, rarely has a group besides the one that wrote the confession endorsed it or affirmed it completely.⁷

Simply put: Creeds proclaim the common faith of the entire church throughout history, a faith in the Father, Son, and Spirit. Confessions explain the implications of that faith as understood by smaller groups within the church. Creeds precede confessions. Creeds (based on Scripture, of course) serve as the basis for confessions. Creeds are more universal than local (although they never lose their local component altogether); confessions are overtly local and contextual. With this distinction in mind, we are ready for a preliminary look at the content of this book—first the major creeds of the patristic period, and then the relation between creeds and confessions as Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and later Protestantism formed their distinct identities.

The Major Creeds

Many Christians in the West are familiar with only one creed, the Apostles' Creed. Others are familiar with two others, the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds. A few may have heard of the "Chalcedonian Creed," a misnomer because that document is not a creed but a "definition" explaining the Nicene Creed. Thus most Western Christians may be surprised to discover that neither the Apostles' Creed nor the Athanasian Creed has ever been formally approved by the whole church. As we orient ourselves to the creeds, a brief explanation of this strange fact is in order.

7. For a complementary explanation of the differences between creeds and confessions, see Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 10–15.

The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles but grew out of what we call a baptismal symbol, an affirmation that baptismal candidates recited as they prepared to enter the water. There were various baptismal symbols (similar, but rarely identical) in use throughout the Christian world in the early centuries, and these baptismal symbols spawned a variety of creeds (this is the story of chap. 2). The baptismal symbol of Rome (often called the Old Roman Creed) emerged in Latin in the second century, and it gradually began to be used in other parts of the Western Christian world as the influence and prestige of the Roman episcopal see (later called the papacy) grew. The Old Roman Creed was first dubbed the Apostles' Creed in about the year 390, and it continued to evolve over time—most notably, through the addition of the famous clause “he descended into hell.” It was basically complete by 500 but did not reach its final form until the early eighth century. We consider the Old Roman Creed in chapter 2 and the Apostles' Creed itself in chapter 6.

The Athanasian Creed was not written by the famous fourth-century Egyptian theologian Athanasius but by a Westerner sometime in the fifth or early sixth century. It was written in Latin (a strong reason not to attribute it to Athanasius, who wrote in Greek!), and it began to be used in Western churches in the early sixth century. From the beginning of its use, it was associated incorrectly with Athanasius in the Western world. We discuss the Athanasian Creed in chapter 7.

So these two Western creeds, the Apostles' and the Athanasian, were produced in very different ways, but what they have in common is that their eventual authority was a product of their widespread use in the Latin-speaking churches. The churches outside the Latin world, however, never officially approved them. So one could say that they hold traditional authority in one region (the West) of the church, but not “conciliar” authority, which comes only with official approval by the entire church.

In sharp contrast, the other great creed—the Nicene—emerged as the result of two major meetings of Christian leaders in the fourth century. The first meeting was held at Nicaea (a resort town just across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, in what is today Iznik, on the Asian side of Istanbul) in 325 and the second at the imperial capital of Constantinople (corresponding to the “old town” on the European side of modern Istanbul) in 381. Because the results of these meetings were so widely approved in the churches, today they are referred to as the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. We dedicate chapter 3 to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, setting the stage for these great ecumenical councils. In chapter 4 we consider the story of the first two ecumenical councils in the fourth century, and thus of the Nicene Creed.



Public Domain / Wikimedia Commons

The Council of Nicaea

The delegates to the Second Ecumenical Council formally ratified the Nicene Creed, and the major groups of the Christian church that did not send delegates to that council later formally approved it as well. Today every organized Christian group that values any creeds at all accepts the Nicene Creed, and no other creed has anything like that degree of acceptance. J. N. D. Kelly, the great English historian of the creeds, famously claims, “Of all existing creeds it is the only one for which ecumenicity, or universal acceptance, can be plausibly claimed. . . . It is thus one of the few threads by which the tattered fragments of the divided robe of Christendom are held together.”⁸ It is thus fair to say that the Nicene Creed is *the* creed of the Christian church. Of course, this does not put the Nicene Creed on a par with Scripture, but it is a statement that Christians of all stripes and in all time periods have agreed on, and thus it deserves to be taken very seriously as a faithful summary of scriptural teaching.

Closely associated with the Nicene Creed is the Chalcedonian Definition, produced as a result of two other major meetings, later approved by most of the church. These meetings are called the Third Ecumenical Council (held in Ephesus, near modern-day Selçuk on the west coast of Turkey) in 431 and the Fourth Ecumenical Council (held in Chalcedon, near Nicaea on what is today the Asian side of Istanbul) in 451. The Chalcedonian Definition is an explanation of the Nicene Creed, giving greater specificity to the creed’s statement about Christ. We discuss the road to the Chalcedonian Definition in chapter 5.

8. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, 1972), 296.

This definition is accepted today by most major groups of the church—specifically, the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches. At the time, though, it was the source of intense division in the Eastern Christian world, and eventually two other groups emerged that were and are separate from what we today call the Eastern Orthodox Church. These are the Church of the East and the Oriental Orthodox churches, and this book addresses these groups and the reasons for their rejection of the Chalcedonian Definition as part of the story of chapter 5.

Even though all Christian churches affirmed the Nicene Creed, and most affirmed the Chalcedonian Definition, the Eastern and Western Christian thought worlds were somewhat different, and as these regions sought to explain and elaborate on their common creedal affirmations, their theologies began to move in different directions. Chapter 8 considers Eastern developments after Chalcedon, especially further debates about Christ that led to three more ecumenical councils. Chapter 9 then deals with the direction of Western theology after Chalcedon.

Eventually, divergent theology and, much more important, divergent ecclesiastical practices led to a schism between East and West into what we today call Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. While this schism was not directly related to the creeds, a difference of opinion about the Nicene Creed played a role in the split, and we consider the events related to that schism in chapter 10.

Confessional Identity in Relation to the Creeds

As we indicated above, this book explores the full scope of Christian confessions, not merely those of Protestant communities. We begin by looking at the decrees of the medieval church, treating them as Catholic *confessions*. There are two reasons for designating the decrees thus. First, the medieval church in the West issued many decrees on doctrine and practice, at times through councils, at times by the pope.⁹ None of the medieval doctrines, however, dealt with the subject of God or the person of Christ, and so they did not touch on the main subjects of the creeds. Thus, they were more like confessions than like creeds per se. Second, and more important, these medieval decrees held normative force for Catholics, but because they were never accepted by

9. It is important to note that any decision by a Western council must be ratified by the pope. A council's decrees are neither binding on the pope, nor mandatory for Christians, unless the pope agrees. On this, see Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power* (London: Methuen, 1970).

Orthodox or later Protestants, they cannot legitimately be seen as ecumenical. Catholic decrees, therefore, functioned and function as confessions for Catholics alone.

Of course, the medieval church came to see these decrees as having the same authority as the creeds; indeed, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 even created what could be called a creed in the sense that after that year it was impossible to be a Catholic without affirming the doctrine of transubstantiation.¹⁰ But papal decrees were not universal in the same way as creeds, since they were not embraced by Orthodox or Protestant churches. Thus, even though Catholics treat their own medieval and modern decrees as necessary for Christian faith, those decrees in fact function as *local* confessions. Indeed, the doctrine of papal authority itself is a confessional boundary, since it is embraced only by Catholics and forms part of their confessional distinctiveness.

The same can be said for developments in the Eastern Orthodox churches. After the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, the East never issued anything else that could remotely be called a creed. Still, there were interpretations of creeds that functioned as confessions. For example, a generation after the Reformation, the patriarch of Constantinople, Jeremiah II, issued a verdict on the teachings of Lutheranism. His confession, as we call it today, was not entirely negative, although Jeremiah refused to see Lutheranism as fully consistent with orthodoxy. The local character of his judgment—it was a reaction to a recent phenomenon in the Western church—obviously marks it out as a confession, not a creed.

Paying attention to the local nature of confessions will help us in our exploration of Protestant confessions. Nearly all Protestant confessions state their positions as timeless and universal, but as we have already seen, each confession is actually normative only for its own specific community. Lutherans confess the physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but they know that such a confession can never bind Zwinglian or Anglican churches. In fact, Protestant confessions frequently state their opposition to other Protestant communities. Reformed and Lutheran confessions often explicitly oppose Anabaptist teachings, and Reformed churches stress their view of the Lord's Supper in direct opposition to Lutheranism. In each of these cases, the confession is used to define a Protestant community or tradition over against other Protestant churches.

Noting the give-and-take between confessions by different groups of Christians will help us in our last chapter, where we explore the nature of modern confessions. It would be tempting to see the period of confessionalism ending

10. See our discussion in chap. 12.

in the seventeenth century, but only if one's definition were too narrow, seeing a confession as a precise statement on theology. The broader definition that we have adopted shows how confessions—as expressions of specific communities that define important issues—continue into the modern world. Although the Barmen Declaration (1934) might focus on a smaller set of issues than confessions from the sixteenth century, it functions the same way as early Protestant confessions.

The initial surge of Protestant confessions (1517–60) are the focus of chapters 14 through 16. These chapters are vital to our appreciating the changes in later Protestant history between 1560 and 1650, changes to be discussed in chapter 17. The opening years of the Reformation were marked by an immediate fracturing of the various Protestant churches—not on the core issues of salvation but on issues of worship, the sacraments, and politics. After the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, at which Luther and Huldrych Zwingli failed to unite on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, both Lutheran and Reformed confessions began to focus on that issue. Anabaptist confessions, likewise, focused on their theological distinctives, especially their aversion to the church's involvement in politics, an aversion that set them over against the magisterial Reformers.¹¹ So influential were these confessions that attempts to bridge the divide and thus create a wider Protestant unity always failed. Thus, between 1517 and 1650 nearly every confession focused mainly on issues of controversy.

From 1560 to 1650, however, Protestant confessions shifted their emphasis in two ways. First, the shorter confessions of the early Reformation gave way to longer confessions, with more detail on issues that pertained to each community. Reformed and Lutheran confessions, for example, offered more nuanced language on their own doctrinal standards, focusing more on explaining their position to their own churches. Second, for most Protestant confessions of this period, there was an increased need to deal with *internal* controversy. For example, the three most influential confessions from this period—the Book of Concord, the Canons of Dordt, and the Standards of Westminster—each dealt with controversies within a tradition. For this reason, these later confessions rarely said much on matters related to other Protestant traditions. By this point in the Reformation, their divisions were well established and seemingly permanent.

After the time of the Reformation, confessional development continued largely through the widening scope of confessional language. Not only did

11. Historians refer to non-Anabaptist reform movements as *magisterial* for this very reason—they were in league with the magistrate, or political government.

new denominations and traditions, such as the Methodists or Assemblies of God, create their own confessions, but existing traditions also created new confessions to address new issues—for example, the Barmen Declaration, occasioned by the rise of Nazism in the early twentieth century. This period was also when confessions went increasingly global, as new communities around the world began to shape their own identity. We consider these developments in chapter 18.

Thus, in contrast to the story of creeds focusing on the universal Christian faith in Father, Son, and Spirit, the story of confessions is one of immense variety, as a changing set of specific issues rises to the fore. Creeds have a standard shape, but confessions come in all shapes and sizes. We now turn to the story of creeds and confessions.