

A Church that Believes, Teaches, and Confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God

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ABSTRACT: This essay retraces the development of the creeds and confessions to understand their continued need in Lutheran theology. It is argued that confession of faith takes place under the duress caused by receiving God's self-revelation. Confession is never merely the preservation of a past statement but germinates within the concrete historical circumstances and intellectual horizon of the day. As such, it provides the necessary grammatical framework to speak the Gospel of the Son sent by the Father and glorified in the Spirit.

Karl Barth writes, “The church ‘possesses’ a confession? No, the church confesses because the confession possesses it.”¹ One might assume that the church decides, creates, and controls the creeds and confessions like businesses control strategic plans, yet Barth claims the church does not originate the confession but rather the confession constitutes the church.

Creedalism and confessionalism bring to mind many images—tests of fellowship for churchmanship, signposts pointing vaguely somewhere, compromise, or mere historical documents that belong to a denomination's history. While these images may contain truth, they do not reflect the primary existence of creeds and confessions. The creeds and confessions are best understood by what it means to confess and, in that light, what they affirmatively say.

While the early church agreed upon the texts of the church's creeds and the Reformers signed their names to the Lutheran confessions, such consensus does not guarantee truth. Many people can be wrong together. As Pannenberg notes, “The content and truth of dogma do not rest, then, on the consensus of the church. Instead, knowledge of the subject matter of scripture produces consensus.”²

1. As cited and translated in Arthur C. Cochrane, “The Act of Confession-Confessing,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 4 (1977): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539394>.

2. On consensus, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1991) 1:12–14.

Christianity is the only major religion that drafts creeds and confessions to encapsulate what it believes.³ At its core, Christianity is not an ethical system or philosophy but faith in God's self-revelation to humanity in history. With this faith, God reveals Himself as the heavenly Father who sends his Son to us that through his Spirit we can receive his love by faith. Faith's work is then to retell God's revelation. Formal creeds deliver the object of belief.

The story of the creeds is the story of God's people trying to faithfully speak the Gospel.

The Bible

New Testament

At the heart of confession stands Jesus's question at Caesarea Philippi. Initially, he asks his disciples who other people say he is, to which the disciples respond with John the Baptist, Elijah, or some other prophet. Jesus then switches to a more personal question, asking, "Who do you say that I am" (Mt 16:15)? This question illustrates the foundational structure of Christian confession and is consistently recorded across the Gospel (Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20; Jn 1:42). Further, this question bids us to formulate our belief. As Sasse writes, "With this question our Lord Himself calls forth the making of creeds and thereby the church's formulation of dogmas."⁴ Jesus does not ask who he is in the abstract as a matter of theological speculation divorced from the hearer; rather, His question demands personal belief. Who is this particular historical person?

Though Simon Peter answered personally, he also speaks for the whole of the disciples since the question was addressed to them all.⁵ He replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." There are two dimensions to confession—one for the person and another for the catholic church. Sasse calls Peter's confession the original confession of the Christian church.⁶ For Luther, this confession is the foundation to Christ's church; in writing about Jesus's reply to Peter, Luther wrote, "Christ's meaning, in sum, is the following proposition: 'My Church is the one that possesses the revelation which you, Peter, are confessing here.'"⁷

3. Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 3rd ed., SCM Classics (SCM Press, 2002), 15.

4. Hermann Sasse, "Church and Confession (1941)," in *We Confess Jesus Christ, We Confess* (Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 1:78.

5. Martin Luther, "Annotations on Matthew, Chapters 1-18," in *Annotations on Matthew, Chapters 1-18; Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 18*, American edition, vol. 67, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown, trans. Jon Bruss, *Luther's Works* (Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 272.

6. Hermann Sasse, "Jesus Christ Is Lord (1931)," in *We Confess Jesus Christ, We Confess* (Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 1:9.

7. LW 67:276. For a more fulsome discussion of Luther's reading of Matthew 16:18, see Franz Posset, "'Rock' and 'Recognition,'" in *Ad Fontes Lutheri*, by Timothy Maschke et al. (Marquette University Press, 2001).

Though confession is done personally, it is not from the person but rather external to the person. Peter's confession was not from within himself but from God. Jesus validated Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17). It was only in the Holy Spirit that true confession can be made (1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 4:2). Confession supernaturally flows from the heart and mouth of those justified and saved (Mt 10:32; Rom 10:9-10). Confession is faith's response to God's self-revelation and does not stop at Simon, for all disciples are called to confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11; Rom 14:11; 1 Jn 4:15).

Grappling with Jesus's identity plays a major role in the Gospel of John (Jn 1:19). His identity has been described as the "leading question running through the whole Gospel."⁸ John the Baptist opens the Gospel by confessing that he is not the Christ before declaring Him as "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:20, 29). Through the gospel, people try to answer this question. The disciples begin with "rabbi" and "messiah" while Nicodemus answers that Jesus is "from God" (Jn 3:2). The blind man healed in John 9 traces an arc of escalating Christological clarity. Beginning in ignorance, he progresses through stages of identity-assignment: a man, then a prophet, and, finally, from God. Martha of Bethany answers with three claims: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (Jn 11:27). Thomas represents the culmination of John's confessional progression, saying, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). The Gospel of John concludes by stating its fundamental confessional purpose: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). To declare Jesus as Lord confronted the power structures of the ancient world, which declared Caesar as Lord.

Beyond documenting the role of confession of faith, the New Testament includes creedal statements that many scholars think predate the New Testament books.⁹ Among these are the prologue to John, the Philippian hymn, the Colossian hymn, and a number of smaller creedal fragments.¹⁰ Sanders finds eight building-blocks in these creeds: Christ's equality with God, His mediation of creation, His sustaining of creation, coming from heaven, and His death, resurrection, reconciliation, and

8. David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2021), 4. Yutaka Maekawa, "The Function of Confessions of Faith in the Gospel of John," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 50 (December 2025): 6–31.

9. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (Continuum, 1972), 1–29. Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, De Gruyter Textbook (De Gruyter, 2024), 64–70. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2005), 132–36. For a discussion of their antiquity, see Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns* (IVP Academic, 2018), 21–31.

10. Typical lists of creed-like passages include Jn 1; Col 1:15–20; Phil 2:6–11; 1 Cor 15:3–8; 1 Tm 2:5–6; 3:16. For a careful parsing of Phil 2:6–11, see David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994): 154–59.

exaltation.¹¹ Nevertheless, these statements are not formal explanations as seen in the creeds, but like the confession of Peter, they identify the one in whom they have faith, Jesus Christ, with the God revealed through the Old Testament.

Old Testament

The biblical basis for confession begins in the Old Testament. The basic form of this confession is the *Shema*, wherein is stated that “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Dt 6:4). Some find Old Testament creeds that identify the Lord by His works. Von Rad identified three ancient credos in the first six books of the Old Testament (Dt 6:21-23; 26:5-9; and Jo 24:2-13).¹² These Old Testament credos demonstrate flexibility in describing God by His redemptive story. Boda notes six elements in these creeds: ancestors, exodus, wilderness, conquest, land, and exile.¹³ Using these blocks, this confession is elaborated, expanded, adapted, and rehearsed through the Old Testament.¹⁴ The Lord is confessed both by name and by works in the Old Testament.

Instead of the term ‘confession,’ Brueggemann prefers the term testimony, which works within the image of a law court; he writes, “The testimony of Israel concerning Yahweh is always of two kinds, one to reorder the internal life of the community in ways faithful to Yahweh, the other to invite the world out beyond this community to reorder its life with reference to Yahweh.”¹⁵ Thus, testimony occurs both before the face of God as confession and before the world as witness.

This Old Testament way of confessing God is not independent of the New Testament but is the ground in which the New is planted and allowed to prosper. “What we see then in the foundational canonical witness of the church is a consistent impulse toward summary, re-presentation, and inner-biblical allusion, which represents reflection on the theology of the Bible in whole or in part.”¹⁶ As Hahn notes, “The confession of the one God unites Old and New Testament. Wherever the New Testament speaks of God, it means the God who has created the world, who has elected the people of Israel and instituted a covenant with them, who has

11. Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*, Society for New Testament Studies 15 (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 24–25.

12. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (Harper & Row, 1962), 1:281.

13. Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology (Baker Academic, 2017), 36.

14. For an expanded list of passages, see Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, 16.

15. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Fortress Press, 1997), 747. For an interesting take on testimony, see Paul Ricœur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Seymour Mudge (Fortress Press, 1980).

16. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, 16.

entrusted his promises to the old covenant community, and who is proclaimed and praised as ruler of the entire world and its history. In view of this shared foundation, Old and New Testament are understood as indissoluble unity.”¹⁷

Confession of the Lord does not end with the Scriptures but rather the God who speaks through them continues to call His church to respond to His revelation by confessing her faith to Him, one another, and the world. The creeds are this story.

Creed

The idea of the creed, per se, developed in the context of baptismal catechesis in which the *regula fidei* was taught. The term *regula fidei*, or rule of faith, is alluded to in Galatians 6:16, though it was used more richly by the Apostolic Fathers such as Irenaeus (ca. 125-202), Tertullian (ca. 160-220), and Clement (ca. 150-215).¹⁸ Though the *regula fidei* was a precursor to formal creeds, it does not contain fixed words or a particular formula but is rather a multivalent tool. Bokedal defines the *regula fidei* as a “normative hermeneutical tool that promotes the textual and theological unity of the Old and New Testament Scriptures.”¹⁹ Bower argues that it is a “narrative construction, [that] set forth the basic ‘dramatic’ structure of a Christian vision of the world posing as an hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of Christian Scripture and Christian experience, and reducing the first principles of Christian theological discourse and of a doctrinal substantiation of Christian faith.”²⁰ Jenson understands the *regula fidei* as “a sort of communal linguistic awareness of the faith delivered to the apostles, which sufficed the church for generations. This gift of the Spirit guided missionary proclamation, shaped instruction, identified heresy, and in general functioned wherever in the church’s life a brief statement of the gospel’s content was needed.”²¹ He continues that it is located in the community’s “communal self-consciousness.”²² Bokedal finds the *regula fidei* “could be equated with Scripture, baptismal confession, or apostolic tradition more broadly” depending upon its need.²³ Before creeds were formalized, the rule of faith guided confession. The rule is neither scripture nor creed but a faithful response to the Word of God that structures the biblical narrative, illuminates the gospel, and leads to the writing of creeds.

17. Ferdinand Hahn, “The Confession of the One God in the New Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (December 1980): 69.

18. Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 236.

19. Tomas Bokedal, “The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology,” *Theofilos Supplement* 7, no. 1 (2015): 57–75.

20. Paul M. Blowers, “The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 199–228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385129700600207>.

21. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

22. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 15.

23. Bokedal, “The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology,” 58.

When creeds were formed, they took trinitarian shape based on the baptismal formula in the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20). Many of these local creeds existed. These precursors to the Apostles' Creed functioned in two ways in the early church. During the actual rite of baptism, the candidate first renounced the devil and then turned to confessing the faith using an interrogative creed. In the weeks leading to baptism, the catechumen would be taught this interrogative creed by baptismal sermons and later by declaratory creeds.²⁴ Interrogative and declaratory creeds were developed using common building blocks linking confession and teaching to the God who reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁵ Belief, confession, and teaching unite around baptism in these proto-creeds. There was not one baptismal creed, as they were local creeds which varied upon location. Indeed, while the roots of the Apostles' Creed predate the Nicene Creed, the actual text as we know it post-dates the Nicene Creed.²⁶ These creeds took on new life when trouble arose.

Nicæa

Faced with a crisis of confession, the church was provoked to create a creed to address rising heresy. After his conversion to Christianity, Emperor Constantine discovered that a dispute about the answer to the question "who is Jesus Christ" had broken out in the Eastern Empire.²⁷ Once again, the question was, "in which god do we believe?" The source of this dispute was the teachings of Arius who was trained in the Alexandrian school of thought exemplified by Origen, which tended to Platonism.²⁸ The Arians believed that there was a time when the Son was not; thus, the Son is not one with the Father in being but something subordinate, something lesser. So, the emperor sought to resolve the issue by bringing the church together in 325 AD at Nicæa to clarify her confession of Jesus. This meeting would be known as the First Ecumenical Council at Nicæa.

In addition to addressing other issues, the gathered council of 318 Fathers created the original Nicene Creed that preceded the Nicene-Constantinopolitan

24. For a readable history, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 30–52. More detailed history is given by Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 120–33, 523–34.

25. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 80–81.

26. For a history of baptismal creeds, the Old Roman Creed, and the Apostles' Creed, see Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 145–212.

27. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1: *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 2nd edition (HarperOne, 2010), 1:182–92.

28. For full details on the history of Arius, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (1987; Revised, W. B. Eerdmans, 2001). As with most ancient discussions, designating the Arians is difficult; see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–30. For an overview of the Arian dispute, see Craig A. Blasing, "Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Reexamination of Nicaea," *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (2010): 372–81.

Creed used today.²⁹ No official notes or minutes of the council were kept; the only records left are fragmentary letters and reminiscences of participants. This creed followed the three part trinitarian form of many baptismal creeds wherein each article identifies the person inwardly and then outwardly through his ministry and work.³⁰ Since this crisis was about Christology, this new creed stressed the second article referring to the Son by affirming that He is “begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance [*ousia*] of the Father,” “begotten, not made, consubstantial [*homoousios*] with the Father,” and concluded with an anathema stating, “The catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes those who ... claim that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or substance [*ousia*], (or created,) or alterable, or mutable.”³¹ The term “*homoousios*” introduced language from outside Scripture to explain the God revealed through Scripture as a novelty. Both terms, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, brought clarity and unclarity simultaneously and would need to be revisited by the church. Further, while the creed addresses the current crisis of Arianism, it left its defenders open to charges of Sabellianism.

While the Nicene position became the prevalent confession, this was not apparent beforehand, nor was it readily accepted. Williams finds Arius represented continuity with earlier theological tradition, particularly 3rd-century Alexandrian theology (Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria). He writes, “Arius was a committed theological conservative; more specifically, a conservative Alexandrian.”³² Likewise, Ayres argues that there were multiple competing schools of thought about how to proceed during the fourth century.³³ Behr notes, “the controversy over Arius was the catalyst that brought two larger traditions of theology into conflict. What was at stake between them is not simply particular points within the same paradigm ... but ..., the way in which theology is approached and, correspondingly, the way in which doctrine is, as Vaggione put it, ‘imagined.’”³⁴ The pro-Nicene position won the day but would face many trials over the coming years. Within six years, Arius would be recalled from exile by the emperor to restore him to communion, and the prime defender of the creed would be exiled³⁵ five times.

29. While we do not have minutes of the council or an original record of its creed, the associated canons are in *The First Ecumenical Council—The First Council of Nice, A.D. 325* (NPNF 2/14:1-53).

30. The terminology of “inner” and “outer” are Luther’s way of discussing the triune persons. Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, Revised, *Studies in Historical & Systematic Theology* (Lexham Press, 2017). Sanders refers to this as the ‘Nicene Line.’ Fred Sanders, “The Nicene Line as Structural Principle for Christian Doctrine,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 27, no. 4 (2025): 464–79. Contemporary theologians speak of economic and immanent relationships. Each of these has slight nuance.

31. Translation found in Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 247–48.

32. Williams, *Arius*, 175.

33. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 78–80.

34. John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2. I (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 31.

35. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, 1:190–91.

Athanasius defended the Nicene position by expounding upon the deity of the Son while arguing that the Arians do not understand the grammar of the Scriptures.³⁶ The council adopted the term *homoousios*, but it was unclear what this word meant. Athanasius would work to define *homoousios* theologically rather than philosophically, yet this still left the Nicene position open to critique regarding the difference between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. He was unable to adequately defend the theology of the Trinity. As Gwynn writes, “What Athanasius lacked was the clarity of language to express his conception of the Trinity as three in one.”³⁷ That task would be left to the Cappadocian.

The original Nicene Creed ended with anathematizing “those who claim that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or *ousia*.” The term *ousia* was fraught with ambiguous philosophical overtures, while the term *hypostasis* was virtually synonymous with it, even in the thoughts of Athanasius.³⁸ The Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—resolved this through establishing more precise definitions for theology. Pelikan writes, “The only way to dispel the confusion was to come up with a definition of *hypostasis* that set it apart from *ousia* and made it a fit instrument for the specification of what was distinctive in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. The *hypostasis*, then, had to be ‘that which is spoken of distinctively, rather than the indefinite notion of the *ousia*.’”³⁹ Understanding these terms in a more theological manner solved the problem Nicæa had created—one could now affirm both the full divinity of the Son and the genuine distinction of the three persons without lapsing into modalism or subordinationism. As such, the church was prepared for another council.

Constantinople

A regional council at Constantinople was called in 381 AD to reaffirm the faith of Nicæa since the church continued to struggle against new forms of Arianism and the Pneumatomachians. In the intervening years, Arians created altered versions of the Nicene creed creating confusion among people about what the Nicene faith was. The Pneumatomachians created confusion on the Gospel by affirming the Nicene position on the Son but denying the divine hypostasis of the Holy Spirit as “Lord and Giver of life.” One of the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzus, presided over most of this council.⁴⁰ The Council of Constantinople is credited with both reaffirming the Nicene Creed and with writing a new creed of the 150 Fathers. The new creed more than confirms the older creed by reinterpreting Nicæa, clarifying it, and giving

36. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 208.

37. David M. Gwynn, “Athanasius of Alexandria,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. Ken Parry (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 114.

38. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1:219.

39. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 1:220.

40. Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus, The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge, 2006), 23–24.

it new purpose. The first two articles respectively about the Father and about the Son are very similar to the Nicene Creed but with primarily stylistic adjustments that still reiterate the strong Christological stance. The third article on the Holy Spirit is lengthened and the anathema dropped.⁴¹ This new creed became known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, or simply the Nicene Creed. In 451 at Chalcedon, this regional council and its local creed were adopted as ecumenical in nature, but it would take time for the Creed to be disseminated across the East and the West. Eventually, it would be confessed throughout the world, but in the West, it is used with one difference.

The *Filioque*

A series of issues led the Western church to add one word to the third article of the Latin version of the creed of Constantinople, a word which would contribute to the schism in 1054 between the Eastern and Western church. The word is *filioque*, or “and the Son.” The term exists in the line, “We believe in the Holy Spirit ... who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” Historians trace the origin of using the *filioque* to the Third Council of Toledo in 587. The Visigoth king, who ruled from Toledo, converted to Nicene Christianity from a version of Arianism known as Homoianism. Kinzig describes this incident thusly: “The principal reason for this addition was no doubt the struggle against Homoianism which also involved denying the Spirit’s divine substance. It was thought that adding the phrase *filioque* would enhance the Spirit’s status, given the fact that the pneumatological section of [the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed] did not contain *homoousios*.”⁴² King Reccared needed to renounce his past heresy by more faithfully proclaiming the faith in this situation. In other words, confession and faithful proclamation required more specificity to confront Arianism, and confronting this heresy was one of the reasons the 318 Fathers had written the creed.

The *filioque* was not a novelty created for Toledo but rather has a longer history.⁴³ Tertullian (c. 155—c. 220 AD) wrote that the “Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.”⁴⁴ Many of the early fathers in both the East and West use “from” and “through” language. Augustine’s psychological model of the Trinity contributed to the West adopting the *filioque*. More importantly, there was a linguistic difference between the East and the West. The Latin text needed and allowed the *filioque*

41. Kinzig gives a history of the text of the Creed of Constantinople along with a detailed analysis of its textual development. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 355–78.

42. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 550.

43. For detailed history see: A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford University Press, 2010). Michelle Coetzee, *The Filioque Impasse: Patristic Roots*, with Rodney Moss, *Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought* (Gorgias Press, 2012) and Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 549–70.

44. Siecienski, *The Filioque*, 52.

because of a gap between the Greek *ekporeusis* and Latin *processio*.⁴⁵ In the East, *ekporeusis* means to flow from a source whereas in the West, *processio* emphasizes the going forth and is neutral about the source. Thus, *processio* does not necessarily include the monarchy of the Father whereas *ekporeusis* does.

Even though the East and West faced the same threat, the Nicene truth needed to be articulated differently. The *filioque* and the related controversy demonstrate the difficulty of bridging the linguistic gap necessary to faithfully proclaim the faith.

Confessions

The Reformation put new fervor into confessing the faith. Martin Luther embodied confession standing at the Diet of Worms in 1521. When asked to recount his writings under pressure of the Emperor and the Pope, he reportedly said, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”⁴⁶ Likewise, in his treatise “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” of 1528, he wrote, “I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷ Luther wrote this confession of faith presuming that he would soon die for his faith. According to Maurer, this treatise is the basis for the Augsburg Confession.⁴⁸ It is at Augsburg that we find the Reformers being asked to give their confessions before the Emperor, the world, and God.

In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V called a diet at Augsburg to bring unity to the church. At this meeting, he requested an orderly presentation of the Reformers teaching. Prior to this diet, the Reformers had already been drafting articles on doctrine amongst themselves, including the Articles of Schwabach (1529), the Articles of Marburg (1529), and the Articles of Torgau (1529).⁴⁹ Since Luther was unable to travel outside Saxony, Philipp Melancthon took a lead role.

45. See the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “The Greek and the Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, September 13, 1995. For analysis, see Coetzee, *The Filioque Impasse*, 41–53.

46. Oswald Bayer, “Necessary Transformation?: The Reformation and Modernity in Controversy over Freedom,” *Pro Ecclesia* 22, no. 3 (2013): 297–98. For a discussion on the chreia, see Samuel L. Young, “How Luther Became the Mythical ‘Here I Stand’ Hero,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2022): 53–72.

47. Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper (1528),” in *Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 37, ed. and trans. Robert H. Fischer, *Luther’s Works* (Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 360.

48. Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Fortress Press, 1986), 4, 239.

49. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2001), 83–104.

While Melancthon originally thought he needed to write an apology to defend Evangelical teaching, he eventually decided a new type of document was needed, a confession.⁵⁰ The word “confession” can refer to several distinct concepts. Confession of sin is the sacramental act whereby a penitent admits his sins and receives the pronouncement of absolution. Confession of the faith results from confessing the word of God. Augustine named his spiritual autobiography a confession. Additionally, Melancthon’s new genre was a confession. Interestingly, all are linked. Confession of sin is a mark of faith, and confession of faith and praise results from confession of sin. All lead to a life given to confessing the God who will save His people.

However, what distinguishes a confession from a creed? Duffy notes that the creeds are confessions, but the converse is not true.⁵¹ Likewise Fairbairn notes the difficulty of distinguishing the two. Creeds are from the ancient church unlike confessions. Creeds are shorter and focus on the Trinity whereas confessions are more concerned with the implications of the Trinity.⁵² Kolb gives an extended definition: “A confession of faith may be defined as ‘a formal, usually (though not always) brief, summary of the central principles of a religion, fixed in its wording. Alongside the task of comprehending the essential content of a faith, it has the function of demarcating that faith in relationship to other religions and heretical tendencies within its own adherents.’”⁵³

This new document, the Augsburg Confession, was signed by the princes rather than the priests of the church or theologians such as Melancthon. With this document, they confessed that “we herewith make public witness and appeal. This is our confession and that of our people, article by article, as follows.”⁵⁴ As a result of the Augsburg Confession and the history leading up to it, including the Lutheran Reformation, Lutheran theology would be linked to confessing the faith.

The Augsburg Confession needed to define and defend Evangelical teaching, but it also had to demonstrate that the Reformers’ teaching was not new but actually catholic, grounded in the Biblical witness, and opposed the same heresies the catholic church. This is the way the confession describes itself: “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers.... The entire dissension concerns a few specific abuses, which have crept into the churches without any proper authority.”⁵⁵

50. Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith* (Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 28.

51. Stephen J. Duffy, “Creeds and Confessions of Faith: From Ages of Belief to an Age of Creedal Malaise,” *Religious Studies Review* (New Haven, CT) 31, nos. 1–2 (2005): 40.

52. Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Baker Academic, 2019), 7.

53. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 16.

54. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000), 34.

55. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 59.

Even though the Augsburg Confession begins by affirming the ancient creeds, it does not just restate them. As Maurer notes in his history of this confession, “The Augustana does not simply take the texts in which Christianity had stated its faith officially since the Council of Constantinople in 381 and repeat them word for word. It interprets and modifies them. This fact soon makes clear that we are dealing not with a formal repristination but with a theological renewal arising from an inclusive understanding of Reformation theology and, in turn, affecting that theology.”⁵⁶ Key to the reinterpretation is articulating justification by faith alone as the article upon which the Church stands and falls.

In like manner, the Confession demonstrates that even the ancient creeds are based in the Scriptures. As Luther said, “The Church of God has no power to establish any article of faith, just as it has never established any nor will it establish any in perpetuity. . . . All the articles are sufficiently established in the Holy Scriptures, so that there is no need to establish anything further.”⁵⁷ The Confession does not exhaust the content of the Scriptures but rather presents its teaching needed for the current conflict using language suitable for the time and place. To establish common ground with their enemies and properly confess their faith, the Reformers also condemned the historic heresies as well as the teachings of the radical Reformation of the day.

The confessors of the Augsburg Confession continued the example set forth by the council of Nicæa, a realization with which the next generation of heirs of the Reformation agreed. The Preface of the *Book of Concord* states that “many churches and schools professed this confession as the contemporary Symbol of their faith in the chief controversial articles against the papacy and all sorts of factions.”⁵⁸ The Epitome describes it, along with the Apology and the Smalcald Articles, as “our symbol for this time.”⁵⁹ Likewise, the Solid Declaration regards the Augsburg Confession as “our creed for this age” and “a pure, Christian creed, which (after the Word of God) should guide true Christians in this time, just as in earlier times Christian creeds and confessions were formulated in God’s church when major controversies broke out.”⁶⁰ Creed and confession are linked, and a church with no confession is not a church.⁶¹

56. Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, 239.

57. Martin Luther, “Theses Against the Whole Synagogue of Satan and All the Gates of Hell,” in *Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 30.2 (Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883), 420.

58. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 5.

59. At this time, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope was considered a part of the Smalcald Articles. Quote from paragraph 3, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 487.

60. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 525, 527.

61. From The Confession of Faith of the Protestant Christian Batak Church. Pelikan, *Credo*, 63.

The Necessity of the Creeds and Confessions for Today

Creeds and Confessions remain necessities for theology, particularly Lutheran theology, and such themes require explanations for full understanding.

Believing, Confessing, Teaching, Preaching

The origin of the words ‘creed’ and ‘confession’ are the verbs ‘believe’ and ‘confess,’ which gets to the root of what creeds and confessions are. Though the terms are nouns, we should not lose the verb sense of an action. According to Kolb, the Reformers understood the importance of confessing being a verb; “The Wittenberg reformers understood ‘confession,’ referring to the document, as a kind of ‘verbal noun,’ in which content could not be separated from the action of presenting the content to the world. For them, holding a confession of the faith meant to be speaking it in public, living according to it, and being prepared to die for it.”⁶²

The verbs confess, preach, and teach result from faith. Pelikan discusses them further: “Believing and confessing, then, have always been correlatives: a creed-like confession of the resurrection of Christ in the New Testament is followed by the formula, ‘So we preach and so you believed.’ The correlation becomes clear in the reiterations and permutations of these two terms, believe and confess (often in combination with the third term, teach...) in the language of creeds and confessions throughout Christian history.”⁶³ Kolb captures this dynamic when he writes, “A confession is therefore faith moving into life and speech. The Christian confession of faith in Christ ‘is oral, is public, and is heard’; it praises God publicly, and it is spoken to God in order to honor Him.”⁶⁴ Likewise, historian Kelley notes that “the early Church was from the start a believing, confessing, preaching Church.”⁶⁵

Faith is a gift of God in Christ, given through the Gospel by the Holy Spirit, by which He calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy. Knowledge of Jesus as Christ and Son of God is offered and bestowed on us by the Spirit. Thus, confession of faith is always a charismatic practice, a fruit of the Spirit that allows us to say “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:1-3). Moreover, our confessions of Christ are empty without His confession before the Father (Mt 10:32, 33; Lk 12:8). Moltmann emphasizes Christ’s confession for us: “Christ’s witness is a public witness of liberating truth. The witness of this truth therefore also takes place in public, in order to set men free from public lies and public fear.”⁶⁶ Confessors do not confess what they must believe but confess the belief they have been given. Simply put, God commands

62. Robert Kolb, “Confession of Faith,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Baker Academic, 2017).

63. Quoting 2 Cor 15:3-11. Pelikan, *Credo*, 37.

64. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 16.

65. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 7.

66. Jürgen Moltmann, “The Confession of Jesus Christ: A Biblical Theological Consideration,” in *An Ecumenical Confession of Faith?* by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Seabury Press, 1979), 18.

confessing Him and His holy name, yet such a good work is only possible by the free gift of the Holy Spirit.

This inbreaking of the Spirit that cuts one off from what was reveals that confession is apocalyptic.⁶⁷ “A true confession has always an eschatological aspect. The confessing Church, as the individual confessor, stands always at the border of time and eternity. . . . To confess Christ is dangerous. It involves a risk of life. Still more dangerous is it to deny Christ.”⁶⁸ Paulson argues that the Lutheran confessors explicitly understood their task as apocalyptic since they were confessed before both God and Emperor.⁶⁹

Confessions do not fall like a tree in a forest with no one hearing but are to be articulated both to God and people. Before God, a confession is doxology, but before men, it is proclamation and teaching. As Kolb notes, “God’s people must continuously confess and teach the faith. For confessing the faith means interpreting and applying the Scriptures to contemporary life. In this sense, confessing the faith is almost synonymous with teaching the faith.”⁷⁰ The Augsburg Confession acknowledges that it is for teaching, for it views itself as a “nearly a complete summary of what is preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction and the comfort of consciences, as well as for the improvement of believers.”⁷¹

Creeds guided the church’s teaching, even before they were formalized; the *regula fidei* described what was taught to catechumens. By the time of the Reformation, catechetical teaching in the West included the Lord’s Prayer, the Decalogue, as well as the Apostles’ Creed.⁷² Luther would follow this model in writing his catechisms, which would be included in the Lutheran confessions. Chemnitz, who authored parts of the Formula of Concord, taught in a manner consistent with the Formula of Concord,⁷³ and it remains so presently. John Webster describes his own experience, “I resolved to structure the content of my teaching in accordance with the intellectual and spiritual logic of the Christian confession as it finds expression in the classical creeds, to allow that structure to stand and to explicate itself, and not to press the material into some other format.”⁷⁴

67. For an interesting exercise in the apocalyptic nature of the Nicene Creed, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “How Apocalyptic Disrupts Theological Tradition,” *Pro Ecclesia* 33, no. 4 (2024): 394–409.

68. Hermann Sasse, “Confession of Faith,” *Springfielder* 28, no. 3 (1964): 8, ATLA0000690357.

69. Steven D. Paulson, “What Kind of Confession Is the Augsburg Confession?: ‘I Will Also Speak of Your Decrees before Kings, and Shall Not Be Put to Shame’ (Psalm 119:46),” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 56, no. 1 (2014): 12–34.

70. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 22–23.

71. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 58.

72. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 377.

73. Christian J. Einertson, “Martin Chemnitz’s Christology in Proclamation and Confession,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2022): 23.

74. John Webster, “Discovering Dogmatics,” in *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Ashgate, 2002), 130.

The need to proclaim the freeing Gospel before the world shapes the form of confession. In the hostile conflict between belief and unbelief, the church works out the language of her confession as the intellectual horizon of the present age presses the church to clarify what she confesses and to distinguish faithful confession from the false alternatives. In our increasingly pluralistic, post-Christian world, the word 'god' can refer to many things. God in our time "is probably nearer to pantheism (world is God) or panentheism (world is contained in God) than to classical monotheism" let alone the revealed God of the Holy Scriptures who redeems his people in Christ Jesus.⁷⁵ The task of preaching must therefore state the church's confession by speaking it faithfully and intelligibly into the world in which the church is called to proclaim the Gospel.

The Faith

Just as the act of confessing is important, so too is the faith confessed. The distinction between confessing and confession corresponds to the traditional difference between *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, the subjective aspect and the objective aspect that come from outside us. The *quae* and the *qua* belong together. "Form and content ... cannot be separated. One cannot divorce faith as an act of believing from the faith that is believed. A confession is, in fact, that which is being confessed here and now. An act of confessing can, of course, become a past completed event and therefore a confession. Insofar as a past confession remains or becomes again a living, present event, it is the content of an act of confession today."⁷⁶ The object of faith is the one whom Moses encountered at Mount Horeb and whom Peter identified; thus, confession's content is not about the experience of receiving revelation but of revelation's object. "Although historically variable, true confession always, as *homologizein*, is the confession of the one dogma, the single, even if complex, trinitarian content given to the faith."⁷⁷

It has been argued that the creeds and confessions are primarily to act as "boundary markers" or fences.⁷⁸ This is affirmed in distinction from this argument that they are primarily vehicles for the act of confessing. By confessing in a world of confused thought, confession by necessity points to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and thus defines a boundary, but the desire is to plainly speak the Gospel in turbulent times.

Creeds and confessions are typically written at specific places and particular times to address an issue confronting the faith. The early baptismal creeds were local, and the Creed of Constantine began as a local creed, yet creeds speak for the

75. Charles P. Arand, "Confessing the Trinitarian Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, nos. 3–4 (2003): 214.

76. Cochrane, "The Act of Confession-Confessing," 61.

77. Michael Root, "The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Understanding and Its Ecumenical Application," *Ecclesiology* 2, no. 1 (2005): 37, ATLAN4400032, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744136605056577>.

78. Fairbairn and Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 247.

whole church as they are catholic and universal in intent with a surplus of meaning. Lutheran confessions continue in this heritage, such as when The Augsburg Confession describes itself thusly: “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers. ... The entire dissension concerns a few specific abuses, which have crept into the churches without any proper authority.”⁷⁹ “Each new confession does not abolish its precursors, but incorporates them.”⁸⁰ Not everyone agrees. Barth writes, “A Reformed Creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders.”⁸¹ There is a difficulty in calling a confession catholic if all do not accept it. This led Jenson to describe the confessions as *proposals* to the church. He writes, “The confessions understand themselves as addresses to the church catholic, making a few allegedly indispensable points about the discourse and life of the church, points that ought always to be observed but must be made explicitly just because they often are not. That is, the confessions are a *proposal of dogma*.”⁸²

The point of the creeds is not their antiquity. If the creeds, or any dogma, were accepted because of tradition, then tradition itself becomes another source of authority competing with the Word of God. Unfortunately, tradition inserts itself into many ecumenical efforts. Sasse cautions us that “one must not read into the New Testament the doctrine of ‘tradition’ as distinct from the written word, which we find with the Fathers since the second century. The Gospel was oral proclamation before it was written. As written word it becomes oral word again in the faithful preaching of the Gospel, as Luther always emphasized.”⁸³ He goes on to note that none of the great Medieval theologians has a doctrine of tradition. For instance, the recent Lutheran-Orthodox joint statement on the *filioque* wherein after acknowledging the continued Arian problem in the West and the needs of translation, the statement recommends not including the *filioque* in translations of the Greek creed because the old age of the text should be valued.⁸⁴ This statement neglects the continued need in the West to distinguish Christian belief from heresies. Tradition

79. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 59.

80. Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse: Confessionalist and Confessor,” in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990), 18.

81. Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, with Thomas F. Torrance (SCM Press, 1962), 112.

82. Emphasis in original. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Fortress Press, 1976), 2–3.

83. Hermann Sasse, “Tradition and Confession,” *Lutheran World* 4, no. 1 (1957): 76. For an analysis of Sasse’s views of tradition see Thomas D. Pietsch, “Hermann Sasse and Jaroslav Pelikan: Confession and Tradition,” *Logia* 26, no. 2 (2017): 31–40, ATLAN4074256.

84. The Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, “Common Statement on the Filioque,” May 27, 2024.

becomes problematic when it is a source of authority, not when the church uses old forms and words to transmit the faith.

Grammar

The creeds function as the basic framework that governs and integrates the church's teaching, proclamation, and praise, thereby offering a coherent structure for the whole of Christian life rooted in eschatological witness to the crucified and risen Christ and providing a grammar of the scriptural language of faith. The Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed distinguishes the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit both by how the persons relate to one another in themselves and in the work attributed to each toward us. This immanent and economic language prevents the grammar from collapsing in either direction and guards against modalism, subordinationism, platonic abstraction, or other heresies. By narrating the story of the acts of the Son empowered by the Spirit and sent by the Father, this grammar highlights the plot of Holy Scripture, thus enabling prayer, doxology, and theological reasoning without collapse or tritheism. "So the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely the 'summary grammar' of Christian speech and thought concerning God. It is the basic framework governing the whole of the Christian life. Since, as the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, it both distinguishes Father, Son, and Spirit from one another and relates them to one another in a specific way on the basis of the eschatological experience of the one who was crucified and raised, it offers a basic integrating model for all aspects and dimensions of Christian life, experience, thought, and activity."⁸⁵

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85. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology* (Baker Academic, 2015), 210.

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