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THE ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH (PART 1): A HISTORICAL APPROACH

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SYNOPSIS

A historical approach to the topic of the essentials of the faith begins with the earliest creeds embedded in the New Testament and traces creedal development through the early forms of the Apostles' Creed to the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Unity among all major sections of Christendom is found in the statement: "One Bible, two testaments, three confessions, four councils, and five centuries." From here there are divergent views, such as Eastern Orthodoxy's acceptance of seven general church councils and Roman Catholicism's acceptance of twenty-one. Anabaptists reject the authority of any church council but accept in general the doctrines that were declared at the first four councils, based on their belief in *sola scriptura* ("the Bible alone").

The essential doctrines of the Christian faith that emerge from this historical approach are those contained in the Apostles' Creed and unfolded in subsequent creeds of the first five centuries. These include (1) human depravity, (2) Christ's virgin birth, (3) Christ's sinlessness, (4) Christ's deity, (5) Christ's humanity, (6) God's unity, (7) God's triunity, (8) the necessity of God's grace, (9) the necessity of faith, (10) Christ's atoning death, (11) Christ's bodily resurrection, (12) Christ's bodily ascension, (13) Christ's present High Priestly service, and (14) Christ's second coming, final judgment, and reign. Heaven and hell are implied in the final judgment and are explicated in later creeds.

The ancient dictum "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, charity" resonates with practically everyone. The question is, What are the essentials? There are three main reasons for seeking the answer to this. First, the essential doctrines are the basis for our unity, since true unity is unity in the truth, and these doctrines are the essential truths. Second, the essential doctrines distinguish cults of Christianity from true Christianity, since these groups claim to be Christian but deny one or more of the essential doctrines of the historic Christian Church. It is not possible to identify these cults, however, unless we know what the essentials are. Third, the essential doctrines are the only truths over which we rightly can divide (i.e., break fellowship). It is better to be divided over truth than to be united in error where essentials are concerned (e.g., Gal. 1:6–9; 2:11–14; 1 Tim. 1:19–20; Titus 1:9; 1 John 2:19), but it is a great error for those who hold the truth to be divided where nonessentials are concerned (e.g., Eph. 4:3). It behooves us, therefore, to know the difference; otherwise, we may find ourselves dividing from those with whom we should be united and uniting with those from whom we should be divided.

Fortunately, we are not the first to tread this ground. The church, particularly the early church, has faced this issue before. It will be helpful, therefore, to look at some historic attempts to define the core Christian beliefs before we attempt to spell out what these essentials may be. With St. Augustine, we can thank God

for heretics,[1] for without them the church would not have been forced to clarify what was resident in the original deposit of faith.

HISTORIC EXPRESSIONS OF ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Many of the New Testament books and creed-like statements in them arose from a context of heretical denials of truths that were contained in the unfolding Christian revelation. There are several of these short creed-like confessions. One is found in 1 Timothy 3:16:

> God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.[2]

Some believe that this passage is the core of what later became the Apostles' Creed. It contains (1) the deity of Christ, (2) His incarnation (humanity), (3) His resurrection, (4) His proclamation and reception, and (5) His ascension. Brief and important as it is, however, there is no reason to believe that it was intended to state all of the essentials of the Christian faith. It, nonetheless, expresses core Christian doctrines.

Another creed-like statement is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5. The confession "that" is repeated several times:

> That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas [Peter], then by the twelve.

Here, too, the essentials of the "gospel" (v. 1) are preserved, but there is no reason to believe that these are all the fundamental Christian doctrines. Nonetheless, the foundation in the inspired Scriptures, the death and burial of our Lord, and His physical bodily resurrection and appearances are all essentials of the Christian faith, as are the doctrines that we are sinners and that Christ died for sinners.

Peter's *Kerygma* in Acts 10

Others point to the *kerygma* ("proclamation") of Peter as the confessional core of New Testament Christianity. The outline of this is said to be in Peter's sermon in Acts 10:36–43:

> The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—[1] He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and starting from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how [2] God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. [3] And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom [4] they killed by hanging on a tree. [5] Him God raised up on the third day, [6] and showed him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is [7] He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, [8] whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.

It has been observed that this kerygmatic paragraph contains the outline of the gospel of Mark, which many consider to be Peter's gospel, since Mark was his assistant (1 Pet. 5:13) and perhaps helped Peter in its composition. The essential doctrines of the Christian faith that it mentions (numbered above) are (1) the deity of Christ, (2) the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, (3) the apostolic witness, (4) the humanity and death of Christ, (5) His bodily resurrection, (6) His bodily appearances, (7) His second coming and final judgment following, and (8) salvation by faith in Christ.

Some scholars believe that a treatise on this topic existed in the early church, although only a few fragments survive. Clement of Alexandria apparently had a copy of it, and Origen thought it was genuine in whole or in part.[3]

The Apostles' Creed

One of the first attempts at a formal Christian creed to be preserved as such is known as the "Apostles' Creed." It underwent several changes throughout the early centuries of the church.

The Old Roman Creed. The earliest form of the Apostle's Creed came into existence in Rome:

> I believe in God Almighty, and in Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord; who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried, and the third day rose from the dead; who ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, whence he cometh to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost, the holy church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting.

The Gallican Creed. By the sixth century, certain changes had occurred in the Apostles' Creed. This version reads as follows (with significant changes indicated in italics):

> I believe in God *the Father* Almighty. I also believe in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, *conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered* under Pontius Pilate, crucified, *dead and* buried; *He descended into hell*, rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, sat down at the right hand of the Father, thence He is to come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy *catholic* church, *the communion of saints*, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh and life eternal.

The most crucial additions were that Jesus "suffered" (which contradicted the views of *Docetism* that denied His real humanity and hence His ability to suffer), that "He descended into hell" (which acknowledged its existence), and the addition of the words "catholic" (meaning "universal") and "communion" (indicating a general unity of believers around this common doctrinal core).

The essential doctrines contained in this version include (1) the Trinity, (2) the deity of Christ, (3) His virgin conception, (4) His humanity, (5) His suffering and death for our sins, (6) His physical resurrection, (7) His present position at the Father's right hand, and (8) His second coming and final judgment. Throughout the creed, of course, is (9) the necessity to believe in order to have remission of sins, for it begins with "I believe."

The Current Creed. The current form of the Apostles' Creed did not take shape until about AD 750.[4] It differs little in substance from the Gallican Creed. The most significant difference is the added statement about creation (indicated in italics):

> I believe in God, the Father Almighty, *the Creator of heaven and earth,* and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh [Gk. *sarx*], and life everlasting.

The use of the word "body" instead of "flesh," as is found in many recent translations of the Apostles' Creed, is an important change with doctrinal implications. The Greek word *sarx* in the Apostles' Creed was properly translated as "flesh" up until modern times. It has been replaced by the word "body," which gives way more easily to a denial of the physical nature of the resurrection. This is due to neo-Gnostic influences on contemporary Christianity manifested in neo-orthodoxy[5] and some neo-evangelical beliefs.[6]

The Nicene Creed (AD 325)

The second great creed amplified the expression of orthodoxy to counter heresies that denied the deity of Christ, His coequal status with the Father, and His being of one substance (essence) with the Father. It also was changed.

The Original Creed. The original AD 325 version states (with significant additions to the Apostles' Creed indicated in italics):

> We believe in *one* God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-*begotten* Son of God, *begotten of the Father, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man*; He suffered, and the third day He rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence He shall come to judge the quick [living] and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost.

The Constantinopolitan Creed. The enlarged, Constantinople version of AD 381 reads (with significant changes indicated in italics):

> We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds, God of God*, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down *from heaven*, and was incarnate *by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man, *and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate*. He suffered *and was buried*, and the third day He rose again *according to the Scriptures, and* ascended into heaven, *and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And* He shall come *again with glory* to judge *both* the quick and the dead, *whose kingdom shall have no end*. And we believe in the Holy Spirit, *the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*

The significant additions to the Apostles' Creed include (1) a stress on Christ's full deity, (2) the oneness of the Godhead, (3) Christ's role in creation, (4) His true humanity and incarnation, (5) His mission to save us, (6) the glory of His return, (7) Christ's reign following His second coming, and (8) the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father. The original version was careful to add that Christ was "not made," that is, He was uncreated and eternal, "Very God of Very God."

The most significant intramural debate among conservative theologians is that over the *filioque* clause ("and the Son"), which affirms that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father. The phrase was not in the original Nicene Creed (AD 325) but was added in AD 589 at the nonecumenical Third Council of Toledo. When it was adopted by the Roman Church, it became the occasion for the split of the Eastern Orthodox Church from Rome in AD 1050.[7] In his classic work, *Creeds of Christendom*, historian Philip Schaff concurs with this account, adding that "the present text of the Apostles' Creed as a complete whole, we can hardly trace beyond the sixth, certainly not beyond the close of the fifth century, and its triumph over all the other forms in the Latin Church was not completed till the eighth century."[8]

The Nicene Creed was, as Schaff asserts, "the first which obtained universal authority" in the Christian church;[9] but even so, it had three forms: the original Nicene (AD 325); the enlarged Constantinopolitan (AD 381), which adds everything after "we believe in the Holy Spirit" except the anathema; and the still later Latin form when the *filioque* clause was approved (but not added to the creed) by popes Leo III (AD 809) and Nicholas I (AD 858).[10] This papal approval eventually led to the phrase being added to the creed, and to the split with the Eastern Church.

The Athanasian Creed (c. AD 428 or later)[11]

Most scholars no longer believe that Athanasius authored this creed; nevertheless, it does reflect his strong emphasis on the deity of Christ. It also is the earliest and strongest explicit creedal statement on the Trinity. The Anglicans and most Protestant bodies, consequently, adopted it, though some have had reservations about the condemnation to hell on all who reject the truth of the incarnation and the Trinity. It reads as follows:

> Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance [essence]. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.…The Father [is] uncreate[d], the Son [is] uncreate[d], and the Holy Ghost [is] uncreate[d].…So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.…So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there be three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created, but begotten.…And in the Trinity none is before, or after another: none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.…He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. Furthermore, it is

> necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is, that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man; God, of the substance [essence] of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and man, of the substance [essence] of his mother, born in the world; perfect God, and perfect man; of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching His Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching His manhood. Who although He be God and man; yet He is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God. One altogether; not confusion of substance [essence], but by unity of person.…Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven; He sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give account of their works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

Several things in this creed demand attention. First, the emphasis is on the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. Second, the framers strongly believed not only that orthodox doctrine is important, but that it is necessary for salvation. Third, the creed is directed against many heresies: Against *tritheism*, it affirms "there are not three Gods, but one God." Against *Monophysitism*, it asserts that there is no "confusion" or comingling of Christ's two natures (human and divine). Against *Nestorianism*, it declares that there is a "unity" of Christ's two natures in one person. Against *Arianism*, it declares that the Son is "coequal" in "substance" with the Father and was not "made" but is "uncreated" and "eternal." In response to the logically absurd notion that the infinite God became a finite human, it makes it clear that deity did not become humanity, but that the second person of the Godhead assumed a human nature in addition to His divine nature. This, of course, eliminates the heresy of *adoptionism*, that Jesus was merely a man who was adopted into the Godhead as Son. It was not the subtraction of deity, but the addition of humanity. It also excludes *Appolinarianism*, since it refers to the Son being fully human, a "perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting," not partially human. Finally, this is the first of the creeds to explicitly address the nature of the final judgment after Christ's second coming as everlasting life (heaven) for the saved and everlasting fire (hell) for the lost. "Everlasting life" entails conscious existence, therefore, so does the parallel phrase "everlasting fire." The phrase "perish everlastingly" also implies consciousness, since in annihilation one would perish instantly, not everlastingly. The creed, thus, also pronounces *annihilationism* as heretical; and since it implies that there will be people in both places, it excludes *universalism* from orthodoxy as well. In short, this is an amazing creed that explicitly anathematizes (pronounces as "accursed") a great many heresies.

The Creed of Chalcedon (AD 451)

The third of the three great creeds is that of Chalcedon. It was adopted in an ecumenical session. It embraces the preceding creeds and adds to the unfolding theological essentials (additions are indicated in italics):

> Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. *This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness*; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, *with a rational [human] soul and a body*. He is of the *same reality as God* as far as His deity is concerned and of *the same reality as we ourselves* as far as His humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. *Before time began he was begotten of the Father*, in respect of His deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, *who is God-bearer in respect of His humanness*. We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten—*in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting [changing] one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories*, without contrasting them according to area or function. *The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union*. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved *and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality [hypostasis]. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word [Logos]* of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us; thus the symbol of fathers [i.e., the Nicene Creed] has handed down to us.

In addition to the triune Godhead, the virgin birth of Christ, and His humanity and deity, this creed stresses the hypostatic unity of His two natures in one person (thus opposing *Nestorianism* and *Monophysitism*), without separation or confusion. The perfection and completion of both natures also is emphasized, along with the eternality of the Son, before all time. In addition, with the accent on the union of the two natures, the creed goes so far as to call Mary the "God-bearer" (Gk. *theotokos*), because the person she gave birth to with regard to His human nature was also God with regard to His divine nature.

DISCERNING CRITERIA FOR ORTHODOXY

With this historical context in place, we are better prepared to discern just what the essentials of the Christian faith are. A historical analysis does not solve all the problems, however, since not all sections of Christendom accept all the creeds and councils of the church. Most sections of Christendom accept the first three creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Chalcedon) and four councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon) as a definitive statement of orthodoxy; however, not all do.

The Roman Catholic View

Roman Catholics accept twenty-one church councils as authoritative. Eastern Orthodox, however, accept only the first seven as authoritative, and all non-Catholics reject the authority of the later councils, pointing to numerous doctrines pronounced in them that are contrary to Scripture. These include worshiping icons, venerating Mary, praying for the dead, purgatory, the necessity of works for salvation, the inspiration of the Apocrypha, the worship of the consecrated communion elements, the bodily assumption of Mary, and the infallibility of the pope.[12]

The Reformed View

"Reformed view" here refers to what is known as the Magisterial Reformation (following Luther and Calvin). This tradition generally accepts the doctrines of only the first four church councils, since beginning with the fifth council objectionable doctrines began to emerge. Those in this Reformed tradition, nevertheless, agree with the other major sections of Christendom on the dictum: "One Bible, two testaments, three creeds, four councils, and five centuries."

In general, if one considers only the major doctrines in these creeds, and not the anathemas or the question of their authority, even most of the rest of Christendom (namely, the Anabaptists) agree with their basic doctrinal expression of the Christian faith. There are, however, three important qualifications. First, there is the issue of the anathemas. Most evangelicals would not agree that those who deny any one of the doctrines in the Athanasian Creed will go to hell, but this *is* what the creed says, namely: "This is the catholic [i.e., universal] faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he can not be saved." A large section of evangelicalism denies that one must believe all of the doctrines as a condition for salvation.

Second, the creed appears to include baptismal regeneration[13] as one of the doctrines that is part of the orthodox creed to which one must agree or be lost forever. Both Calvin and the Anabaptists reject baptismal regeneration, and even most people who accept the doctrine would not agree that those who reject it will go to hell forever.

Finally, the Athanasian Creed appears to affirm the amillennial view adopted by the later Augustine and many who followed him, whereas many of the early church fathers before him and even Augustine himself in his earlier period were premillennial.[14] The creed seems to declare one general resurrection of both saved and lost when Christ returns, whereas the premillennial view calls for two resurrections separated by a thousand years (cf. Rev. 20:4–6). Even most who are amillennial, however, would not make this doctrine a test of orthodoxy, as indeed it should not be.

The Anabaptist View

This view is sometimes called the Radical Reformation.[15] Most Baptist, Congregationalist, Charismatic, Mennonite, Free Church, and Independent Church traditions come from this tradition. Many in this tradition had great respect for the Apostles' Creed and were evangelical in their central doctrinal beliefs,

but they rejected any ecclesiastical authority, holding strongly to the view that the Bible alone has divine authority. This did not mean that they believed that confessions had no value, or that the early creeds did not contain essential orthodox doctrine. It simply means that they believed that only the Bible is infallible and divinely authoritative. In the words of Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225–1274), who summed up the belief of many Fathers before him, "We believe the successors of the apostles only in so far as they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their writings."[16]

NOTES

1. Augustine, "Of True Religion," *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J. H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 8.
2. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
3. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1978), 1070.
4. *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 35.
5. See Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), chap. 6.
6. The neo-orthodox theologian Emil Brunner declared emphatically, "Resurrection of the body, yes: Resurrection of the flesh, no!" See *Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 372.
7. *The Oxford Dictionary*, 512–13.
8. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: The History of the Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1.19.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. See Schaff, 1.26.
11. Philip Schaff claims it "is a clear and precise summary of the doctrinal decisions of the first four ecumenical Councils between AD 325 and 451" (*The Creeds of Christendom*, 1.37). This would place it after AD 451.
12. See Norman L. Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995).
13. For an in-depth discussion of baptismal regeneration, see H. Wayne House, "Baptism for The Forgiveness of Sins: Sign, Seal, or Means of Grace?" Part One, *Christian Research Journal* 22, 2 (1999): 26ff, and Part Two, *Christian Research Journal* 22, 3 (2000): 22ff (http://www.equip.org/free/DB055-1.htm and http://www.equip,org/free/DB055-2.htm).
14. Early fathers' patristic works that were premillennial include Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Shepherd of Hermas, Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus, Commodianus, Justin Martyr, Lactantius, Methodius, Epiphaius, Gregory of Myssa, and the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. See George Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Books, 1972 reprint), 1.451. For Augustine's earlier position, see *City of God*, 20.7.
15. See George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Truman State University Press, 2000) and Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).
16. Aquinas, *On Truth*, 14.10–11.