

East and West in Relation to Creeds

I. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*

- A. **Councils and Creeds.** Although not every creed or confessional statement comes from a council (e.g. Apostles' Creed, Athanasian Creed) the normal pattern of church history is that creedal statements come from church councils and carry the authority of the bodies that produced them.
- B. **Common acceptance through Tradition.** Traditionally, both the Eastern and Western churches have accepted the declarations of seven councils to be binding for all the church, hence they are designated "ecumenical." These councils hold one of the primary places in the Tradition of both churches. For both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church, sacred Tradition is a necessary, God-given, divinely authoritative aid to go along with the Scriptures in teaching what is necessary to be believed in the Christian life. Some are even willing to say that Tradition is another source of revelation in addition to the Scriptures.
- C. **Eastern focus.** The concept of an ecumenical council is that it represents the thought of the whole of the Christian world. This idea is historically true of these seven councils concerning their acceptance by both East and West but is false concerning the participation of both East and West. All seven of these councils were held in the East, were called by Eastern emperors, presided over by Eastern bishops, and reflect Eastern thought. No Western council ever received the kind of universal recognition that these seven Eastern councils did.
- D. **List of councils**
 1. 325 – Nicaea (upheld divinity of the Son equal to the Father, produced original Nicene Creed)
 2. 381 – Constantinople (upheld divinity of Son and Spirit, finalized Nicene Creed)
 3. 431 – Ephesus (condemned Nestorianism, produced no creedal statements)
 4. 451 – Chalcedon (upheld that Christ is one person in two natures, produced Chalcedonian Definition)
 5. 553 – II Constantinople (condemned authors viewed as Nestorian, produced no creedal statements)
 6. 680 – III Constantinople (upheld that Christ has two wills, produced no creedal statements)
 7. 787 – II Nicaea (upheld the veneration of images; produced no creedal statements)

II. *A Lack of Creeds*

- A. **Decline of creedal statements.** As we progress through church history, we can observe a lack of creedal documents that have gained wide acceptance within the church. We even see this with the seven councils, as the earlier councils produces documents of a much more doctrinal nature, while the later ones tended to focus more on discipline. This trend becomes more pronounced to the point that there are really no significant creedal statements throughout the middle ages.¹
- B. **Foundational issues.** One potential reason for the decline of creeds is that most of the foundational issues in regard to the faith had been worked out. Major heresies strike at the Scriptural understanding of God, Christ, and salvation. The essential issues concerning God and Christ had been worked out by 451, and although the doctrine of salvation had not been given the same focus, the whole church believed that salvation was only to be found in Christ. There were official church pronouncements on important doctrinal issues, but they tended to focus more on refuting and condemning error than delineating the specific truths conveyed in the Scriptures.

¹ Note: I am unaware of any histories concerning creedal statements that seek to explain the reason for the lack of creeds over this period. Therefore, what follows is my best effort at piecing together reasons and may not be a fair representation or full view of these issues.

- C. **Decline of the East.** Another major factor in the lack of creedal statements is the decline of the Eastern church under political and social pressures. As we observed above, the seven ecumenical councils all had an Eastern focus. This fact hints at the idea that the West was willing to embrace the doctrinal proclamations of the East, but the East did not reciprocate. This becomes more and more important as the East and West begin to drift apart. One of the key reasons for this drift is the rise of Islam. As Islam arose and spread in the 600's, many of the places that had been major centers of the Eastern church were brought under Islamic rule. This caused the Eastern church to have a more defensive outlook and to feel the need to preserve themselves in the face of such a strong and hostile enemy. As a result, Eastern theology and practice has, in effect, been frozen since that time. As the Western church progressed in relative security and the Eastern church stood still under threat, tensions increased, leading to the schism between the churches in 1054.

History of the Division of the Church

I. *Faultlines Between the Churches*

- A. **Doctrinal Disputes.** There were many doctrinal reasons that both East and West gave for why they ultimately split with one another, but two were the primary issues.
1. **Filioque Clause.** The dispute over the insertion of "and the Son" into the Nicene Creed by the Western church is often given as the reason for the split between East and West. This gives too much weight to the issue, but it was key point of dispute between the two sides. The East could not forgive the West's unilateral insertion and the West did not appreciate the East's hostility.
 2. **Papal Primacy.** The other key dispute was over the place and power of the Pope. Over time, Popes tried to exert their authority over the other metropolitan bishops. While this was accepted in the West, it was resented in the East, particularly when the Pope intervened in Eastern disputes. Conversely, the Pope charged the Patriarch of Constantinople with trying to unjustly elevate himself by dubbing himself the "Ecumenical" Patriarch. The struggle between these two titans in the church could only lead to a split and points us to its real cause, politics.
- B. **Political Disputes**
1. **Nicholas vs. Photius.** In 858, the emperor deposed Ignatius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, for rebuking his immorality and replaced him with a man named Photius. Pope Nicholas held a synod at which he declared Photius to be illegitimate and threatened excommunication if he was not removed. Photius responded with a synod in which he declared the Pope illegitimate and charged the whole of the Western church with heresy. For a time, Ignatius was restored to his position, but he also became reconciled to Photius, who legitimately succeeded him after his death. Photius never relented in his opposition and hostility to the Popes and the West.
 2. **The emperor's marriage.** Another source of hostility between East and West came with the fourth marriage of Emperor Leo. A fourth marriage was forbidden by Eastern custom and Leo deposed the Patriarch for condemning the union. There was no custom about this in the West and the Pope sided with the emperor.
 3. **Disputes over jurisdiction and practice.** As the East and West diverged more and more, they began to compete for who held jurisdiction over particular regions and kingdoms. In response to losing some territory to the West, the Patriarch shut down all Latin worship and monasteries in Constantinople and circulated a letter charging the West with additional serious errors. The Pope responded by sending a list of errors held by the East. The Patriarch would not receive the letter, and this led to the formal excommunication of the East in 1054. The East responded with their own excommunication, and later efforts at reunion failed.