

CATHOLICITY GLOBAL AND HISTORICAL:
CONSTANTINOPLE, WESTMINSTER, AND THE CHURCH
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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“We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church”: so runs the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, the one thread that holds together the tattered fragments of the Christian church. In this creed Constantinople I asserts four things: the unity of the church—it is one; its holiness—it belongs to God; its catholicity—the church is international, found throughout the world, and “teaches completely, without any omissions, all the doctrines which ought to be known to humanity”;¹ and its apostolicity—the church is founded on the apostles and the apostolic teaching.

This Niceno-Constantinopolitan quadrilateral is based firmly on the teaching of the Bible. It is expressed clearly in one concise passage, Eph 2:11-22. Here Paul focuses on the unity of the church, for the Jew–Gentile division has been broken down by Christ so that “he made both one”; “he created the two in him into one new man.” Peace with God in and through Christ simultaneously reconciles and unites the strongest enemies in one body to God through the cross. Later, Paul affirms that there is *one* baptism. In his other letters the same theme is prominent. Romans was probably written against the backcloth of tensions at Rome between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Yet the gospel is for both, and both are branches of the same olive tree. Philippians addresses the need for the church to stand shoulder to shoulder in the face of persecution, for each to look not on their own interests but those of the other; for Euodia and Syntyche to reach a common agreement. In First Corinthians, in the face of rampant factionalism, Paul insists that there is only one body. In the course of time, differing interpretations arose on the unity of the church. Rome held that the church’s unity—and catholicity—was founded on Christ’s appointment of Peter as the rock on which it would be built, so Peter as the bishop of Rome and all his successors were and are the basis of the church. There having been no western representatives at Constantinople I, it took over one hundred years for it to be fully recognized as

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¹ Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (3d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 494 (citing Cyril of Jerusalem).

ecumenical—despite having resolved the trinitarian crisis. We will not be discussing the way Rome has interpreted this quadrilateral, as it was originally an eastern statement. The East followed more closely the Cyprianic model, in which the apostolate—and from that the episcopate—was collegial.

In Ephesians, Paul describes the church as holy—“the whole building grows into a holy temple (*naon hagion*) in the Lord.” It belongs to God, and its holiness is expressed in dynamic growth. As the temple was the dwelling place of Yahweh, so now the church is the place where the Holy Spirit is. It is “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” In this Paul echoes the Gospel of John, where Jesus promises that he and the Father would come, in the Holy Spirit by implication, to make their permanent dwelling with those who love Jesus and keep his commandments (John 14:23).

As for catholicity, while the word *katholikē* does not occur in the NT, the concept is present. In Eph 2, not only has the gulf between Jew and Gentile been broken down with the cessation of the law of ceremonies, but “in Christ we *both* have access by one Spirit to the Father.” In keeping with the parting instructions of the ascending Christ the gospel had been preached to those who were far off as well as those who were near. The first steps had been taken to its spread to all nations in accord with the sweep of God’s redemptive purposes and the risen Jesus’ specific command prior to his ascension (Matt 28:18-20).

The church’s apostolicity is evident in its being “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” The apostles were invested with the authority of Christ for their task of founding and establishing the church. Apostolic doctrine was to be the lifeblood of succeeding generations, as Paul instructs Timothy in his final letter (2 Tim 2:2).

In the Niceno-Constantinopolitan declaration, these four adjectives are mutually defining and interpenetrating. No one of the attributes of the church can be isolated from the others and retain its proper integrity. They are equally ultimate. It is here that digressions frequently occur. The tendency of liberalism was to focus on the unity and catholicity of the church at the expense of its apostolicity and holiness. On the other hand, a stress on apostolicity and holiness at the expense of the church’s unity opens the door to sectarianism. Continuous splintering is the almost inevitable consequence, best exemplified in American evangelicalism, with thousands of denominations. This is even more so in independent church government. Where every single congregation is autonomous and where legislative authority is confined to the local congregation, *any* confession of the Christian faith beyond the local is purely consultative and advisory; the relentless search for purity usually ends not only in an abdication of unity and catholicity but in an incapacity to be apostolic.

I. *The Westminster Assembly and the Catholicity of the Church*

The Westminster Assembly took the Niceno-Constantinopolitan quadrilateral seriously. It affirmed the catholicity of the church in accordance with its unity, holiness, and apostolicity. Its commitment to the apostolicity and holiness

of the church is so well known that I am deliberately avoiding discussing it in this lecture. What is less common knowledge is its commitment to catholicity. The Assembly expressed catholicity in two ways: firstly, in geographical and global terms, with respect to the Reformed churches, and to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus (WCF 26.2), and, secondly, historically, in relation to those who had gone before, the Fathers and medievals. Here, there was good precedent in Vincent of Lérins, for whom what is truly catholic is what “has been believed everywhere, always, and by all people” (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*)² and in Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that the church is catholic with respect to place (*per totum mundum*), the condition of the people, and time, since it lasts until the end of the world.³ The truly catholic church, according to Melancthon, is supported by the witness of all times.⁴

1. *Geographical Catholicity*

Obviously, the seventeenth-century world was smaller than ours. The Westminster Assembly was set up in the first instance to defend the doctrine of the Church of England. Its responsibilities were entirely determined by Parliament. At the time, England was locked in civil war. The future, at best, was highly uncertain. The Continent was reaching the end of the utterly devastating Thirty Years’ War. Moreover, what Americans may easily overlook is that Britain as a political entity did not yet exist; only with the Act of Union of 1707 could one speak of a United Kingdom of Great Britain. While England had a handful of small colonies—Barbados was one, there were a few elsewhere—and plied increasing trade by sea, its great imperial involvements lay in the unforeseen future. There were limits to the extent its church leaders could realize the catholicity of the church, through no fault of their own. Yet despite the narrower horizons of the day, it was still a vital factor in the Assembly’s thinking. I will mention six ways in which this was so.

(1) It is seen in *the relative diversity of its membership*. The differences on ecclesiology are well known. What has become clearer are the different theological alliances. This is evident throughout its deliberations but especially in the disputes over the extent of saving grace, involving English hypothetical universalists such as Edmund Calamy.

In S522 W 22.10.45 he insisted “I am farre from universall Redemption in the Arminian sence, but that that [sic] I hould is in the sence of our devines in the sinod of Dort; that Christ did pay a price for all, absolute for the elect, conditionall for the reprobate, in case they doe beleive; that all men should be *salvabiles, non obstante lapsu Adami*; that Jesus Christ did not only dy sufficiently for all, but God did intend in giving of Christ & Christ in giving himselfe did intend to put all men in a state of salvation in case they doe beleive.”⁵

² Ibid., 90.

³ Ibid., 499.

⁴ Ibid., 507.

⁵ Chad Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly, 1642–1652” (7 vols.; Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2004), 6:202–3.

In August 1645 the debate raged for several days. The Assembly refused to weaken its position, but on the other hand the controversy did not lead to exclusion, for Calamy continued to play an active part in its business.

(2) It is seen in *the attempts to accommodate the independents* in the debate over church government. The majority took great pains to maintain the unity of the Assembly, allowing inordinate time for the independents to make their case.

(3) It is evident in *its constant correspondence with other Reformed churches on the continent*. The complete correspondence of the Assembly and its members, together with the full critical text of the Assembly minutes is to be published by Oxford University Press in five large volumes under the editorship of Chad Van Dixhoorn. The Assembly was inhibited from replying to all who wrote to it due to the binding requirement that it undertake nothing without the authorization and approval of both Houses of Parliament. As Van Dixhoorn calls it, this was “Parliament’s Assembly.” This was evident when a letter was received from Hamburg, referring to a case of conscience, to which the Assembly did not reply since it did not come through Parliament.⁶ S. W. Carruthers refers to a request for help for a Greek minister suffering in Greece, in response to which nothing appears to have been done, and to a letter from churches in Zealand, to which it is again unclear as to whether the Assembly replied.⁷

Bearing in mind these restrictions on the Assembly’s freedom, a sample of official correspondence, by no means exhaustive, from June–September 1644 includes a letter from the classis of Amsterdam, which was referred to the Committee for Letters from Churches Abroad.⁸ Others were received from the churches of Hanau and The Hague, from the synod of Holland, from Switzerland, and Germany, from the churches of North Holland, Guelderland, Utrecht, Switzerland, and Geneva. Bremen was added to a circular letter from the Assembly, on news that it had been offended by being left off.⁹ Letters were sent to the classes of the Netherlands.¹⁰

(4) It is demonstrated by *the expressed concern of the divines to be in harmony with those churches*. A few sample comments will suffice.

After the Solemn League and Covenant was signed on 19 September 1643, Dr. Cornelius Burgess insisted that the Assembly must be governed by “what is most agreeable to the best reformed churches.” In a rough way, he urged, their method of procedure should be the same as “we doe find most of the churches of Christ to proceed in.”¹¹ A few weeks later, on 15 November, Alexander Henderson, one of the Scots commissioners, exhorted the Assembly: “You are

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:65.

⁷ S. W. Carruthers, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly* (ed. J. Ligon Duncan III; Greenville, S.C.: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 65-69.

⁸ Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming,” Vol. 5: “Minutes of the Westminster Assembly,” p. 167; and Vol. 2: Fols. 1r–293v, 12 April 1644–15 November 1644.

⁹ Carruthers, *Everyday Work*, 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming,” Vol. 3: “Minutes of the Westminster Assembly,” p. 175; and Vol. 1: Fols. 1r–198v, 4 September 1643–17 November 1643.

at this time as a citty set upon a mountaine; the eyes of E[n]gland], S[cotland], I[reland] & of all reformed churches are upon you . . . and the eyes of papists, Arminians, &c. are all upon you, & howsoever they may seeme to dispise the day of small things, yet they behould this Assembly with great feare and astonishment.”¹² Debates on baptism and the Lord’s Supper included expressions of concern that sacramental practice be conformed as far as possible to continental forms. On 3 July 1644, Herbert Palmer referred to the practice of the French church on receiving communion standing rather than sitting.¹³ On 8 August, Charles Herle warned that “if you conclude against it [dipping], you condemne the reformed churches that practise it. Those that incline most to popery are all for sprinkling.”¹⁴ Twelve days later, Samuel Rutherford reminded members that “the eyes of all Reformed churches is upon this Assembly.”¹⁵ On 6 November 1646, the House of Lords stressed to the Assembly the necessity of Protestant churches abroad knowing that Parliament never intended to innovate on matters of faith.¹⁶

There were of course limits; the divines had minds of their own. Stephen Marshall sounded a cautionary note to the effect that “for the rest of the Reformed churches, our uniformity is not intended to reach so farre as that those things which they had nothing to plead for, but only seeing rules and prudence, that we should be tyed to that.” Charles Herle much prized conformity with Reformed churches, but reminded the Assembly of the need for adaptation to national circumstances.¹⁷

(5) It is further seen in *the large number of citations of continental Reformed theologians*. In the space of only a few weeks in the autumn of 1643, the following were cited in the minutes: John Cameron of Saumur, Chamier, Calvin in Book One of the *Institutes*,¹⁸ Caspar Olevian, Johannes Piscator, Sculbertus, the French and Belgic Confessions, Luther,¹⁹ Cameron again and Daniel Tilenus,²⁰ Gomarus, Junius and the French synod,²¹ Piscator, Gomarus, “the judicious Calvin,” Molinaeus and Tilenus,²² Peter Martyr,²³ Calvin again, Junius and Gomarus, “the councils and synods,” the Church of England homily, the Churches of Scotland and Ireland, the Synod of France, the Palatinate, as well

¹² Ibid., 3:311.

¹³ Ibid., 5:174.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5:219.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5:238.

¹⁶ Ibid., 5:71-72.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5:391-92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 3:5-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:16-18.

²⁰ Ibid., 3:29.

²¹ According to Lightfoot’s Journal; see *ibid.*, Vol. 2: Introduction to Appendixes: Note on the Membership of the Westminster Assembly; Table of Contents for John Lightfoot’s Journal and the Minutes of the Westminster Assembly; and Appendix A: “‘A Briefe Journal of Passages in the Assembly of Divines’ by John Lightfoot,” p. 50.

²² Ibid., 3:36.

²³ Ibid., 3:46.

as “beglise, Bohemia,” Arminius and Socinus (hardly Reformed),²⁴ Piscator again,²⁵ Melancthon, Chamier, and Calvin,²⁶ Calvin yet again,²⁷ Cameron, Beza,²⁸ Beza and Calvin once more,²⁹ Beza again,³⁰ Luther and Calvin, Piscator,³¹ Beza and Piscator,³² and Chamier.³³

Well might Van Dixhoorn remark on the constant reference to continental divines in debate and the continued traffic of correspondence between the Assembly and the churches in Europe.³⁴ Morris comments on the affinity between the English Reformed and the continentals when he remarks that “in them as in a mirror we may almost see the entire doctrinal process of Protestantism making itself confessionally manifest.” He observes: “It was this fact that led the Assembly, or at least some proportion of its members, to entertain the hope . . . that the Confession they were framing might win its way to general favor and possibly to formal acceptance in the continental churches.”³⁵

(6) Last, but by no means least, is Chapter 26 of the Confession of Faith, *On the communion of the saints*. This is one of the most neglected chapters both in theory and especially in practice. The chapter is an expansion and description of the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in . . . the communion of saints.”

Union and communion with Christ is the heart of salvation, according to the Larger Catechism, 65–90. It is expressed in the various elements of the *ordo salutis*, and is evident both in grace and—most fully—in glory. In WCF 26.1, it is the foundation of the communion that the saints have with one another. This is explicit in WCF 26.1 and is unfolded in LC, 66–90—it entails union with one another in love.

The connection between union with Christ and love for all who are united to him is evident in WCF 26.2, where it is said to extend to practical matters, including the relief of material needs, as well as ministry and communion in the worship of God and “other spiritual services.” The communion the saints enjoy with each other does not erode or destroy the integrity of the individual and in particular his or her property. This is an outflow of the doctrine of the Trinity—there is unity (and union) but in diversity.

This chapter of the Confession is a serious challenge to the church in all ages. The Assembly recognizes that the communion the church enjoys in Christ extends to “all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus,” whether they are in full

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:58-65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:90.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:103, 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:134.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:155.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3:163-65.

³² *Ibid.*, 3:202-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3:210.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:371.

³⁵ E. D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols: A Commentary Historical, Doctrinal, Practical on the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and the Related Formularies of Presbyterian Churches* (Columbus, Ohio: n.p., 1900), 821.

agreement on every point of doctrine or not. Indeed, love and union on the human level reflects the union the saints have in Christ. Union and communion with one another is co-extensive with those who are united to Christ. An entailment of this chapter is that a breach in the church questions the reality of the relationship with Christ. This is a forgotten chapter and its neglect bespeaks a guilty collective conscience.

2. *Historical Catholicity*

(1) This is seen in *the Assembly's defense of the doctrine of the Church of England*. Its first task was to defend the doctrine of the Church of England from all false calumnies and aspersions. The work of Anthony Milton, Bryan Spinks, and others has highlighted the fact that the Church of England had a solidly Calvinist post-Reformation past; the Laudian reaction was an aberration. The debates on the Thirty-Nine Articles, held in the first months of the Assembly, were not sideshows as Warfield wrote. They were only interrupted by the political necessity of accommodation with the Scots in order to secure their support in the face of initial military setbacks in the war against the king. Later, when aspersions were cast upon the Book of Common Prayer by George Gillespie, a Scots commissioner, members of the Assembly leaped to its defense.

(2) It is also evidenced by *the Assembly's self-conscious awareness of its continuity with the historic church*. That the Westminster divines saw themselves in continuity with the historic church needs little argument for those who have read their writings or considered the records of debate. William Twisse, prolocutor of the Assembly, had himself edited the works of Thomas Bradwardine. The divines' writings are full of citations of Augustine.³⁶ Their debates are replete with references to the patristics and medievals, far too many to mention in total here. In the brief space of a few weeks in September 1643, the divines cited Cajetan, Cathoricus, "Gregory the Great, many excellent passages upon this place," Duns Scotus and Savanorola,³⁷ Justin Martyr, Jerome, Augustine and Bernard,³⁸ Athanasius and Cyril,³⁹ Tertullian,⁴⁰ Bernard,⁴¹ Athanasius again, "St. Gregory" (no more specific description being provided in the minutes), Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians, and Bernard again,⁴² Bellarmine,⁴³ Augustine,⁴⁴ classical authors, Tacitus, Solon, Plato, and others,⁴⁵ and Augustine again.⁴⁶

³⁶ John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1973), 38-39.

³⁷ Van Dixhoorn, "Reforming," 3:4, 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:47-48. See also 3:21 for another report of the same speech.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:31.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3:42.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3:58, 64-65.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:75; see also 3:90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:94-95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:107.

(3) Finally, it is also demonstrable by *the Assembly's acceptance of the ecumenical creeds*. An influential Reformed spokesman questioned this recently. Robert L. Reymond argued that Calvin rejected “Nicene trinitarianism” and suggested that the Westminster divines may have followed him in this. In particular Reymond talks of “Calvin’s rejection of the ancient doctrine of the Father’s eternal generation of the Son” and asserts, *inter alia*, that the doctrine of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit goes beyond Scripture. Westminster trinitarianism is Reformed, following Calvin, not Nicene, he claims.⁴⁷ Reymond fails to refer to primary sources from the fourth century, and his grasp of the patristic debates betrays a lack of first-hand familiarity. Moreover, his reading of Calvin is limited—largely confined to the 1559 *Institutes*—and, for our purposes, he does not refer to the Westminster Larger Catechism, which teaches the very things he opposes. In fact, the LC more clearly follows the Niceno-Constantinopolitan teaching than the Thirty-Nine Articles do, although no one (including Reymond, I’m sure) would make a case that *they* were not faithful to the tradition.⁴⁸ The earliest MSS evidence for the LC, 10–11, as well as the draft of those questions presented to the Assembly, undermines Reymond’s case that the Assembly rejected the eternal generation of the Son. I have reviewed Reymond’s work elsewhere.⁴⁹

In the first edition of his *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Robert L. Reymond suggested the possibility that the Assembly may have rejected the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit as espoused in the ecumenical councils. Instead, he proposed the idea that it chose to follow Calvin who, Reymond argues, considered the language of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan settlement at this point as speculative.⁵⁰ While Reymond withdrew these claims in the second and revised edition, they are sufficiently far-reaching to require investigation. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that Calvin was in agreement with the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.).⁵¹ This is seen in Calvin’s own teaching on both these doctrines that Reymond claims he rejected. In this sense there is no dichotomy between Nicene trinitarianism and Reformed trinitarianism.

That Westminster did not depart from pro-Nicene trinitarianism is clear in the Larger Catechism. Question 10 asks,

What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead? A: It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Spirit to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.

⁴⁷ R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (New York: Nelson, 1998), 317-41.

⁴⁸ WLC, 10–11.

⁴⁹ Robert Letham, review of Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, *WTJ* 62 (2000): 314-19. See also Paul Owen, “Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism: An Examination of Robert Reymond’s Understanding of the Trinity and His Appeal to John Calvin,” *CTJ* 35 (2000): 262-81.

⁵⁰ R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 324-41.

⁵¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 252-68.

The answer explicitly states that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. In theory, it might be argued that while the Son is said to be begotten of the Father, this did not occur “from all eternity.” Such a reading cannot be sustained for a number of reasons. First, it would be incongruous for the Spirit to proceed from eternity but the Son’s generation not to be from eternity. This is even more improbable since the key historically to the resolution of the trinitarian crisis was the settlement of the deity and personal relations of the Son, after which the deity and personal relations of the Holy Spirit followed more readily. It would have been absurd for the Assembly to have supported the eternal generation of the Holy Spirit but not the eternal generation of the Son. Secondly, Reymond’s suggestion would require no comma before “from all eternity,” thus restricting the reference of the phrase to the immediately preceding statement concerning the Holy Spirit. It might also require a semi-colon or colon after the second mention of “Father;” separating the relations of the Son from the relations of the Spirit. There is no semi-colon or colon at that point. Moreover, Van Dixhoorn has discovered that the majority of early manuscripts include a comma before “from all eternity;” thereby supporting the final phrase as covering the relations of the Son as well as the Holy Spirit.⁵²

However, even if a comma were not present at that point, the draft questions for the Larger Catechism prove the generation of the Son was understood as from eternity. Presented in S708 15.9.46pm, they read as follows:

Ordered: ‘9 Q: Is the sonne equall with the Father in the Godhead? A: The sonne of God who is the only begotten of the Father from all eternity, is true God equall with the Father.’

Ordered: ‘10 Q: Is the Holy Ghost also God, equall with the Father and the sonne? A: The Holy Ghoste who from all eternity proceeds from the Father and the sonne is also true God, equall with the father and the sonne.’⁵³

These questions show that the Assembly’s committee—no evidence suggests that the body as a whole differed—understood the Son to be begotten of the Father from eternity, and that this in no way diminishes his equality with the Father or his true deity.

Reymond also argues that the absence of the phrase of the Creed of Nicaea referring to the Son as “God of God” supports his thesis. This phrase, he argues, implies an element of subordination for the Son; moreover, it was speculative and went beyond the bounds of Scripture. He misses the point that the phrase is also absent from the Thirty-Nine Articles, both from Article 1, “Of Faith in the Holy Trinity;” and Article 2, “Of the Word or Son of God, which was made very Man.” I have yet to hear anyone advance the notion that the Articles diverged from Nicene trinitarianism, still less since they conspicuously support the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in Article 8 as provable “by most certain warrants of holy Scripture.” Even more striking, the phrase is absent also from the

⁵² Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming,” 1:259 n. 186. The punctuation of Bod Nalson 22, fol. 133v. has a comma, supporting the generation of the Son from eternity, but Bod Nalson 22, fol. 159v does not. The earlier printed version of c. 22 October 1647 and the c. 14 April 1648 Parliamentary printing with proof texts support fol. 133v.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6:357.

Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), popularly known as “the Nicene Creed.” If Reymond’s thesis were correct, the Nicene Creed would reject its own trinitarianism! Moreover, the phrase was from the Creed of Nicaea (325 A.D.), propounded at the very start of the trinitarian crisis but jettisoned along the way. I have demonstrated elsewhere that Calvin defends this Creed against the Italian anti-trinitarians.⁵⁴

That the eternal relations of the three trinitarian persons was not a matter of controversy at the Assembly, and that the classic trinitarian settlement was fully accepted by the divines is evident from the absence of any record of discord on the matter. For instance, in the debate on Article 2 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, in S7 TU 18.7.43, in which the Son is said to be “begotten from everlasting of the Father,” while there was, according to Lightfoot, “a great debating,” this surrounded the later reference to the sufferings of Christ and whether it should be stated that he suffered in his soul. There is no record of controversy—or even debate—over the reference to the eternal generation of the Son.⁵⁵ In Morris’s words, the Assembly adopted “the Nicene or Chalcedonian description, reproduced almost literally in the Confession . . . as the only one which in any adequate sense embodies or unifies these various forms and aspects of the revelation.”⁵⁶

This simply confirms Muller’s argument that the Reformers—including Calvin—and the later Reformed orthodox operated in the context of their inheritance from the late Middle Ages. To understand them it is necessary to have a grasp of the scholastic method, and of the history of medieval exegesis.⁵⁷ The Assembly’s Reformed context establishes its Catholic credentials, for the Reformers were at odds not with the Catholic tradition but with its immediate representatives. Evidence abounds from Luther, Calvin, and their contemporaries.⁵⁸ In Westminster’s case, this is abundantly demonstrated from the minutes, where the records have shown beyond the slightest doubt that every theological question was debated from a foundation of the exegesis of biblical texts, in dialogue with the history of exegesis reaching back to the early days of the church. So pervasive is the focus on the exegesis of the Bible that it would be futile here to list the texts on which debate turned—the evidence is literally overwhelming.⁵⁹ However, it was not carried on in isolation; it took place self-consciously as part of the great tradition of the church.

⁵⁴ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 264-67.

⁵⁵ Lightfoot’s Journal, in Van Dixhoorn, “Reforming,” 2:9-10.

⁵⁶ Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols*, 166.

⁵⁷ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Muller, “Scholasticism in Calvin: A Question of Relation and Disjunction,” in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (ed. W. H. Neuser; Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 247-65.

⁵⁸ On Calvin and the Fathers, see A. N. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and concerning Calvin and the Trinity, see chapter 12 of my book *The Holy Trinity*. On worship, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975).

⁵⁹ I refer the reader to the forthcoming multi-volume critical edition of the Minutes of the Westminster Assembly, edited by Chad Van Dixhoorn, to be published by Oxford University Press, which will run to over 850,000 words.

Furthermore, the Westminster Confession of Faith follows a similar structure to the classic creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Both these focus on God the Trinity, the life and work of Christ the Son, church and sacraments, and the last things. While the Confession is not shaped by any one central dogma—the idea of controlling principles is a nineteenth-century concoction—it does loosely follow this arrangement. God, his decree, the plan of salvation in Christ the Mediator and its outworking, the church and sacraments, and the last things are all extremely prominent elements. That there are additional sections on law, gospel, and liberty, including church-state relations, is due to the historical context in which the Confession was made. The order of the Apostles' Creed is followed closely in WCF 25 on the church (I believe in the holy, catholic church), WCF 26 on the communion of the saints (the communion of saints), WCF 27–29 on the sacraments (the forgiveness of sins, or one baptism for the remission of sins in Christ), WCF 32 on the resurrection and the final judgment (the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting). As for the Larger Catechism, it follows the classic catechetical structure of creed, ten commandments, and Lord's prayer. Together, these things demonstrate that the divines did not seek to innovate but saw themselves as standing in the tradition of the Church of England.⁶⁰

3. *The Boundaries of Catholicity*

This focus on catholicity has to be seen in context. Not all doctrine was acceptable. Catholicity was neither blind nor accepted in isolation; it was qualified by apostolicity. There were boundaries to acceptable doctrine. At the top of the list of what was unacceptable was antinomianism. A standing committee regularly examined prominent antinomian leaders and their books and referred its recommendations to Parliament for civil action. Antinomianism posed a theological threat but was also perceived to jeopardize the stability and safety of the body politic. Second came the distinctive dogmas of Rome; not the Trinity or Christology but especially transubstantiation and the Papacy. Anabaptism was firmly rebuffed on the sacraments, the civil magistrate, lawful oaths, and private property; there is evidence that it was lumped together with antinomianism as the chief enemy. Arminianism was also rejected. The Assembly was far gentler towards Lutheranism and hypothetical universalism. With the former, it opposed its teaching on consubstantiation, and with the latter, its position on the divine decrees, but in both cases it did so with a lack of venom, regarding the respective exponents as friends rather than foes.

The evident point here is that the catholicity of the church operates within the boundaries of holiness and apostolicity. In this the Assembly followed Constantinople I and all seven ecumenical councils. In these, those who stepped outside the boundaries, who adopted heretical doctrine, were deposed from episcopal office, anathematized, and sent into exile. It was the same with Paul. In the self-same letter in which he insists that there is neither Jew nor Greek, for

⁶⁰ See Robert Letham, "Is Evangelicalism Christian?" *EQ* 67 (1995): 3-33; and Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009).

we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28), he forcefully condemns those who preached another gospel (Gal 1:8-9). The catholicity of the church requires the capacity to anathematize those who seek to tear down the boundaries. *Without those boundaries there is nothing about which to be catholic.*

II. *The Church in the Twenty-First Century*

1. *Geographical Catholicity*

The church is found throughout the world, it is global. The reality of the global church is overwhelmingly evident today. Demographics alone demonstrate it to be so. The Anglican communion is a topical case in point. The balance of power has swung from Europe and North America to Nigeria, Rwanda, the Far East, and South America. With the rapidly growing churches in India, China, and elsewhere, this sea change is dramatic and irreversible. This poses interesting and potentially exciting possibilities but also some serious dangers.

2. *Historical Catholicity*

The church is found throughout history. We do not live in a vacuum but have an inheritance from the past. This is based on the created nature of man. Humans were not made to be isolated individuals but relational (cf. Gen 1:26-28). Second Chronicles 20:14 reads, “And the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly.” Jahaziel, as any other person in the OT, was seen as related to his ancestors. You were A the son of B the son of C; your historical antecedents identified you. Moreover, you were also related to your tribe; in Jahaziel’s case, the tribe of Levi—there was a contemporary, geographical relatedness. In this, humans reflect in a creaturely manner the relationality of God, who is not a monad but a trinity. Hence, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel in the midst of the assembly—in the corporate, relational context, not in private isolation.

3. *How Much Historical Catholicity Is There in Evangelical and Reformed Circles?*

1. *Historical theology has been neglected or rejected.* For many in Reformed circles church history began in 1517 after a hiatus of over a thousand years, during which not much happened of significance. To some the past teaching of the church is irrelevant; one leading British conservative evangelical writes, “I am not convinced that many ‘Evangelicals’ are truly Evangelical. . . . Where are the people who are truly willing to think through this question with nothing in front of them except an open Bible?”⁶¹ Alan Jacobs’s comment is apposite: “From Luther’s time to our own, every generation of Protestants produces people who rise up to proclaim that the Church lost its way within decades of Jesus’ death, leaving the true gospel forgotten and unproclaimed until . . . well, us.”⁶²

⁶¹ Stuart Olyott, “Some Personal Thoughts on Ministerial Training,” *The Evangelical Magazine* (January 2009): 16.

⁶² Alan Jacobs, “Do-It-Yourself Tradition,” *First Things* 189 (January 2009): 28.

Might it not have spared a lot of turmoil if Pinnock, Sanders, and Boyd had been aware that what they paraded as an exciting new development was merely a rehash of Socinianism? Would it not have helped if they had been aware that their claim that the church was held captive by Greek philosophy sprang from ignorance that this theory had been refuted many times over?

An accurate knowledge of exactly what the church determined on the incarnation is acutely needed in the western church. This is an elementary point but one that is overlooked in the curricula of many western theological seminaries, which act as though Chalcedon was the terminus of christological conflict, not considering the developments signaled by the fifth and sixth ecumenical councils. It is important to understand this not only for a proper grasp of the incarnation but of the gospel of which it is not merely a part but central. It is also necessary if we wish to relate the incarnation to other areas of the theological spectrum.

There are those who claim that we are entering an entirely new era requiring a massive paradigm shift in the church's thought and action. In this case, historical theology is merely a curiosity. It may have a part in an ongoing conversation but the debate has moved on. The past is effectively sidelined since a conversation, as it progresses in subtle and dynamic ways, renders obsolete and irrelevant the comments made five minutes ago. Many voices praise the idea that the church will be freed from its captivity to Western Europe and North America. This misses the point that the foundations of the church were laid by Egyptians (Athanasius and Cyril), Turks (the Cappadocians, Maximus the Confessor), Tunisians (Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine), and a Syrian (John of Damascus), to say nothing of the apostles (Middle-Eastern Jews)—these hardly look like Western Europeans, let alone North Americans. This mantra is a coded message, indicating that its utterer wants to move away from the confining dogmas of the Reformation.

Moreover, precisely because the Christian faith is global, the contributions of Western Europe and North America have their place alongside those of Egypt, Turkey, and Syria. If globalism prevails, these regions can hardly be excluded. However, to place the speculation of Anne Nasimiyu Wasike that in the African context Christ is to be regarded as a mother—since mothers are what Africa needs—alongside the historic declarations of the church of East and West that have stood for a millennium and a half as acknowledging the truth, and to see them *both* as equal partners in a dynamic and ongoing conversation, is to deal a fatal blow to the apostolicity of the church. The ecumenical creeds cannot be reduced to conversation partners at a global roundtable. Insights there may and will be from various parts of the world. But the nature of the ecumenical councils was quite different—they simply confessed the truth and the church recognized what they confessed. They were acknowledging the apostolic faith, not bringing insights from their culture. The same principle applies to the teachings of the Reformation. As Richard John Neuhaus insisted, where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed.⁶³

⁶³ Cited in R. R. Reno, "Religion, Culture, and Public Life," *First Things* 192 (April 2009): 57.

Behind the claims of some globalists it is not difficult to see a strain of anti-Semitism. Jesus was a Jew and Christology has to be seen in the context and against the background of Yahweh's struggles with Israel in the history of his covenant. This is a particular theme of the recently published lectures of T. F. Torrance on the incarnation. Jesus was *not* a European or an American, but neither was he an African or an Asian. The historical backgrounds of peoples in these countries cannot be regarded as parallel to that of Israel and used either to argue that other religions prepare for Christ in an analogous way to the OT, as is common in missiological circles, or to suggest that their paradigms are of comparable value to the Jewish one.

Furthermore, innovation to be valid and effective must be rooted in the appropriation of tradition. Innovators must first master the field before they can develop it; mastery (a conservative task) is necessary for effective innovation (a constructive task). As a striking example, let me refer to the greatest composition Beethoven ever wrote—at least, that seems to be what Beethoven himself thought—his String Quartet in C sharp minor, Op. 131. Franz-Joseph Haydn (1742–1809) developed the string quartet out of the divertimento, giving it a structure to which he, Mozart, and the early Beethoven all sedulously adhered. It had four movements, the first in sonata form (exposition of main themes, development, recapitulation, and coda), followed by a slower movement (adagio or andante), a minuet and trio or scherzo, and a final movement, frequently in rondo form (successive and recurrent contrasted sections). The work would start in the tonic (or home) key and eventually, after a range of modulations, return to it.

Beethoven's *œuvres* show his complete mastery of the form. However, as he progressed, he began to stretch it to its limits. His Op. 132 had five movements, his Op. 130 had six, finishing with the astonishing *Grosse Fuge*, parts of which sound as if they could have been composed over a century later. The Op. 131 took the process further, to seven movements. Moreover, instead of starting with an allegro in sonata form, Beethoven—unprecedentedly—begins with a slow fugue, all peace and tranquillity in contrast to the *Grosse Fuge*. He changes key from C sharp minor to E flat minor (in bar 46) to B major (bar 55) to A major (bar 68), eventually ending in the tonic major, C sharp major. Bach, the supreme master of the fugue, never changed key.⁶⁴ Moreover, towards the end of the second scherzo, which moves at a frenetic pace, Beethoven causes the ensemble to break down. That is not all—as movement succeeds movement there is *nothing* in sonata form, until right at the end the seventh and final movement, a brilliantly taut, highly compressed sonata-allegro form, ties together the strands from the previous six movements.⁶⁵

Even in his earlier, more strictly classical works, Beethoven has astonishing innovations. The third movement of the Op. 18 No. 6, with the viola and cello giving a consistent and conventional stress on the first beat of each bar, the first

⁶⁴ Robert Winter, *The Beethoven Quartet Companion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 248.

⁶⁵ *Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets and Grosse Fuge* (from the Breitkopf & Härtel Complete Works Edition; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., n.d.), 2:119-58.

and second violins play an insistently syncopated rhythm. Effectively Beethoven has brought about civil war between the members of the quartet, a recipe for disaster. But this is Beethoven, and the result is both breathtaking and brilliant.⁶⁶

We could bring further examples from Mahler's development of the symphony, or Schoenberg and the twelve-tone scale. They all built upon the preceding history, and mastered the tradition. Development cannot occur in a vacuum.

Global Christianity in the twenty-first century, to be truly catholic, must be apostolic—grounded in Scripture and built upon the teaching of the church. It is worryingly evident that many who have leaped onto the bandwagon of globalism—mainly in this country—are ready to move beyond the foundations. On the other hand, it is my impression that for too many in the evangelical and Reformed churches, an appreciation of the historical catholicity of the church is lacking. Only when these distortions are corrected will it be possible *meaningfully* to reaffirm with Constantinople I, “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:103-20.