



Westminster's Trinitarianism: Nicene or Reformed?

In the Fall 2000 (Vol. 621, No. 2) issue of *The Westminster Theological Journal* Robert Letham reviewed very harshly my *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (First Edition). One of his criticisms had to do with my question regarding whether the Trinitarianism of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, II.iii, is "Nicene" or "Reformed"—by "Reformed" here I simply mean the *non-speculative* view of "eternal generation" and "eternal procession" espoused by John Calvin and his followers—a question that I do not regard as out of bounds to raise. I had suggested that the view of the *Confession* is the latter but not in any totally new or radical way, of course; indeed, I acknowledge that the language of the *Confession* is that of the earlier Nicene and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds.



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Letham contends that I arrived at my conclusion by "building an unprovable hypothesis on an insupportable theory." But have I? When we learn that Calvin's Trinitarianism, along with other tenets of his faith, "created a party," even the Reformed churches (Warfield), whose view of God was "fundamentally different" from the past in the belief that "the persons of the Trinity are equal to one another in every respect" (Bray), why should we not at least consider whether or not the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the high-water mark of Reformed confessional writing, just might have intended by its very brief statement on the Trinity in II.iii to side with Calvin's non-speculative understanding of the Trinity over against the Nicene Fathers' sometimes speculative understanding of the doctrine? Particularly pressing does this question become when we recall that

when during the first weeks of its sessions, the Westminster Assembly was engaged on the revision of the Thirty-nine Articles, and Article viii on the Three Creeds came up for discussion, objection was made to the *eik qeou'* [*ek theou*] clauses. It does not appear that there was any pleading for the subordinationist position: the advocates for retaining the Creeds rather expended their strength in *voiding the credal statement of any subordinationist implications*.¹

Why should we not conclude, then, when these same men, their earlier debates on Article viii having prepared the way for a more summary mode of procedure, turned to the task of writing a new confession of faith—the confession that we now know as the *Westminster Confession of Faith*—that they would have had the same opposition to any and all subordinationist implications in this new confessional expression of their Trinitarianism? In fact, as Alex F. Mitchell observes, "the so-called Athanasian Creed is shrunk up into the single sentence"² of II.iii, concerning which reduction John Murray states:

[Chapter II, Article III's] brevity is striking and its simplicity is matched only by its brevity. Both surprise and gratification are evoked by the restraint in defining the distinguishing properties of the persons of the Godhead. It had been Nicene tradition to embellish the doctrine, especially that of Christ's Sonship, with formulae beyond the warrant of Scripture. The Confession does not indulge in such attempts at definition. Later generations lie under a great debt to Westminster for the studied reserve that saved the Confession from being burdened with such speculative notions as commended themselves to theologians for more than a thousand years, but to which Scripture did not lend support. Hence all we find on this subject is the brief statement: 'the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Spirit eternal proceeding from the Father and the Son.'³

Does not this collocation of data suggest that a difference exists between Nicene Trinitarianism and what I would characterize as the non-speculative Trinitarianism of the Westminster Assembly? I think so, but even here I do not want to dogmatize. But I will say this: while it is just possible that the Westminster divines intended to stand by the earlier creeds uncritically and to affirm the early church's particular

doctrines of the Father's *continuing* generation of the Son out of himself and the Spirit's *continuing* procession out of the Father and the Son with respect to their *essential* being as God, I would suggest that much more likely they intended their Trinitarian statement—clearly shorn of virtually all of the Nicene verbage and thus its non-biblical speculations—to be understood, in keeping with Calvin's more scriptural insights, as an expression denoting the eternal "order" in the Godhead.

It is true that certain English churchman of the period, such as George Bull and John Perkins, wrote defenses of the Trinitarianism of the Nicene Creed, but I find it difficult to believe that the framers of the *Confession* simply leaped back over Calvin's treatment of the Trinity as if it were non-existent and returned uncritically to the theology of Nicea with its speculative subordinationism in essential subsistence of the Son to the Father (and later of the Spirit to the Father and the Son). American orthodox Presbyterian theologians, such as Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, John Murray, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Loraine Boettner, and Morton H. Smith, have generally followed the sixteenth-century Reformers' insistence that the second and third Persons of the Godhead are both autotheotic, that is, God of themselves, and thus are both self-existent Persons.

Letham's criticism arises from a very proper concern, namely, the implication in my question as I posed it that Reformed Trinitarianism is different from the Trinitarianism of the ancient church, thus severing the Reformation cause away from the ancient church at a strategically vital nexus. He contends that Calvin himself, solicitous to maintain catholic unity with the ancient church as evidenced by his frequent favorable citations of the early fathers, particularly Augustine, would have opposed such a severing with every ounce of strength in his being. While Letham's concern is justified since it is certainly true that we should not sever the Magisterial Reformation away from the teaching of the ancient church *where it is not necessary to do so*, I believe that he has too high a view of the ancient church's authority. This becomes evident when he concludes his review by posing to me Colin Gunton's question:

...if we can no longer...appropriate for ourselves the language of the past—for example, the affirmations of the Nicene Creed—then on what grounds are we able to judge whether we share the faith of the Fathers who formulated the Creed?

But Gunton's question (and indirectly, Letham's) begs the whole point of our difference. Is our primary concern to be to assure ourselves that we "share the faith of the Fathers who formulated the Creed"? I think not. Is our primary concern to be to "appropriate for ourselves the language of the past"? I think not. Is not our primary concern to be to assure ourselves that our faith *first of all* passes biblical muster, employing the faith and creeds of the ancient fathers as secondary aids and helps as we seek to learn and to enunciate the truth of the infallible Scriptures? I certainly think so, and I would hope that Letham thinks so as well. And is not the faith of the ancient fathers, while we revere their creedal labors, to be considered by us as a secondary authority to the teaching of Scripture itself? I certainly think so, and again I would hope that Letham thinks so as well. Therefore, I do not think that it is essential to the contemporary Reformed church's commitment to the "faith of the fathers" as set forth in the early ecumenical councils that it must accept their creedal pronouncements with no qualifications. And neither did Calvin.

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Calvin and Calvinism* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), V:279, fn. 137, italics supplied.

² Alex F. Mitchell, *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly Divines* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874), li.

³ John Murray, "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:248.