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Faith and Order Paper no 153 (New Revised Version), 1996 – Confessing the One Faith: An ecumenical explication of the apostolic faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)

Geneva: WCC Publications. 139 Pages. Price: R16,90

Reviewer: Prof I W C van Wyk (Hervormde Teologiese Opleiding)

In 1982 the Commission on Faith and Order initiated at Lima, Peru a new theological programme for the next years: *Towards a Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith*. The aim was to produce an ecumenical explication of the apostolic faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan (381). In 1987 a study document was published. Enormous reaction was received from theologians, theological faculties, churches and ecumenical institutes. These comments were carefully examined, studied and further developed by the Steering Group, which during the three-year period revised the text considerably in order to publish it in a completely *new revised version* in 1990. This was a huge milestone. Why? Because of these words from the Standing Commission on Faith and Order in 1990: "The common confession of the apostolic faith is one of the essential conditions and elements of unity which have been identified in our common ecumenical history ..."

What I personally am very happy about, is the publication of the names of the participants in the various consultations. This convinced me, as an outsider, that we have here to do with a publication of immense importance and high academic value. A group of experts was responsible for each and every article of faith. For years and years this group, with the help of theologians worldwide, worked to reach consensus on the background, understanding and meaning of the particular article. A short list of the people who were involved would give readers an idea of the quality of this book.

From Germany: Wolfhart Pannenberg, Ulrich Kühn, Günther Gassmann, Hans-Georg Link, Jürgen Moltmann, Dietrich Ritschl and many more. From the United States of America: Roberta Bondi, William Rusch and John Dreschner, for example. From Switzerland: Günter Wagner. From Scotland: Duncan Forrester. So one could go on and on. In short: the most knowledgeable theologians on specific topics all over the world participated in this project.

The method that was used in giving an explication of each and every article of faith, is very satisfactory. This could be illustrated with the example "*we believe in the Father almighty*". In the first part of the explication the reasons why the church confesses these words are given in brief. On pages 27 and 28 we read, for instance: "To call this loving and faithful God at the same time 'mighty' points to the assurance that all life, reality and history are not left to themselves or to worldly power and principalities, but are grounded in and sustained by a God whose power is as unlimited as his love." The second part of the explication concerns the biblical witness behind these words. There is a close look at the text of the creed and then the arguments from scripture are brought to the fore to make clear why the church confesses as it does. The third part is called "explication for today". In this part modern problems are discussed. Concerning this part of the creed, the authors decided to discuss the following problems: Can we still confess God as father? Can we still use this masculine language in times of women's emancipation: The scope of God's fatherhood, the Almighty, Omnipotence and theodicy, and Father Almighty? Concerning the language-problem they say for example: "... the Church must make clear that this language neither attributes biological maleness to God nor implies that what we call 'masculine' qualities, assigned only to

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men, are the only characteristics belonging to God.” Concerning the almightiness of God it is stated: “It (the word Pantokrator) does not mean ‘one who can do anything he wants’ in an unqualified way, but rather ‘one in whose hands all things are.’” Their answer to the theodicy problem is this: “Christian tradition argued that evil is a consequence of the freedom that is God’s gift to human beings. But this does not provide a full answer to the question of theodicy, for evil is also present outside the realm of human responsibility. The ultimate answers lie in God’s overcoming evil, suffering and death in the reconciliation of the world through the Son of God.”

Hopefully these examples give an idea of the importance and usefulness of this book. My personal opinion is that each and every student and minister should have a copy of this book. It can help us understanding our faith and bring clarity in difficult problems of faith. And it can provide church leaders with biblically grounded arguments to defend our common faith, hope and love.

In 1998 one of my student groups at the *Hervormde Teologiese Opleiding* already made use of this book as prescribed literature – and with great success. I can therefore recommend this book to all lecturers, especially of dogmatics, as an extremely helpful source of knowledge.

