

# CREEDS: WHERE THEY CAME FROM AND WHY WE USE THEM IN WORSHIP

The first time that any of us may have given much thought to the recitation of the *CREED* was when we encountered them in Confirmation class. And, for better or worse, that may be the last time we gave the creed much thought. To be correct here, I should be saying the Creeds; for as Lutherans we confess three creeds. Those readers who come from other faith communities may be unfamiliar with those creeds Lutherans confess, so let me name them here: The Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. This order is chronologically when they were composed. *See appendix I for the full text of each Creed.*

## The Apostle's Creed

Also known as the "Old Roman Creed", this creed is the earliest known dating to sometime in the first or second century AD.

## The Nicene Creed

Commonly known as the Nicene Creed, this creed is actually the Creed of Constantinople (381 AD), written about sixty years after the Nicene Council and the "original" Nicene Creed (325 AD). The original form did not include any description of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and included a pronouncement of anathema on anyone who does not believe in the full deity of Jesus as described in the creed.

## The Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed is extremely important as one of the earliest detailed statements of the nature of the Trinity and dates from the early fifth century.

Some background information might be helpful before we move too deeply into the various Creeds. First, the word Creed comes from the Latin *Credo*, meaning "I believe", it is the opening word of the Apostle's Creed. So a creed is a statement of belief. But why do Christians have to have so many of them? That is one of the questions I plan to answer in this discussion.

The introduction of the creed into the liturgy has a curious history. Its original usage was at baptism. From the earliest days repentance and the acceptance of belief of the church was the condition *sine qua non* of baptism into the Body of Christ, and the formal interrogation as to both was made of converts before they received the sacraments. A statement of belief that 'Jesus is Messiah' with all that this implied might be accounted sufficient in Jewish circles, with their background of unwavering monotheism. But more was rapidly found necessary among the gentiles, to furnish security that the convert was not simply accepting 'the *Kyrios* Jesus' as one more 'Savior' among his 'gods many and lords many'. The baptismal creed was elaborated as a series of three questions dealing respectively with the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, and clear traces of it in this short form are to be found in the first half of the second century. (Dix 485)

The Council of Nicea in CE 325 carried the use of the creed a step further. It became not only a test of belief for those entering the church from outside. As we saw in our study of the

development of New Testament Canon, there were a number of conflicting beliefs in existence and the early Christian Church was working out the conflict between orthodoxy and heresy. Because of this conflict, the creed was made to be a test for those already within the church, by solemn affirmation of which they might prove that they believed what the church had always believed and not some new private invention of their own. But I am getting ahead of myself here, and want to take the three creeds in order of appearance.

**The Apostle's Creed** comes to us from early church history. It is a variation of the 'old roman Creed' which we find in the writings of the early church fathers of the mid fourth century, but most likely was developed in the late second century. Notice the explicit statements about Christ's human nature which address Gnostic heresy that Christ was a spirit, not a human. The following is the Latin text of the ORC:

*Credo in deum patrem omnipotentem; et in Christum Iesum filium eius unicum, dominum nostrum, qui natus est de Spiritu sancto et Maria virgine, qui sub Pontio Pilato crucifixus est et sepultus, tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit in caelos, sedet ad dexteram patris, unde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos; et in Spiritum sanctum, sanctam ecclesiam, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem.* (I believe in God the father all powerful; and in Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, who was crucified under [the authority] of Pontius Pilate and was buried, and on the third [day] was resurrected from among the dead, ascended into heaven to sit at the right of the father, and he comes in judgment of the living and dead; and in the Holy spirit, the holy assembly, the forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the flesh) author's translation.

You can see how much of what we confess as the Apostle's Creed was derived from the old Roman Creed. What I find interesting is how the phrase holy 'catholic church' replaces the word *ecclesiam*, which meant a gathering or group of worshippers. But by the time this creed had evolved into the Apostle's Creed the church had become the universal Christian church. The text of the Creed as we recite it today is found in the writings of Origen, Tertullian and Irenaeus. Early church legend held that the Apostle's Creed was so named because the twelve followers of Jesus each composed a section of the creed. This fiction has been discredited as a legend from somewhere in the fifth or sixth century.

The Apostles' Creed, drawn up in the first or second century, emphasizes the true Humanity, including the material body, of Jesus, since that is the point that the heretics of the time (Gnostics, Marcionites, and later Manicheans) denied. (See 1 John 4:1-3)

Thus the Apostles' Creed is as follows:

- \* I believe in God the Father Almighty,
- \* Maker of Heaven and Earth,

*The Gnostics held that the physical universe is evil and that God did not make it.*

- \* And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord,
- \* Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
- \* Born of the Virgin Mary,

*The Gnostics were agreed that the orthodox Christians were wrong in supposing that God had taken human nature or a human body. Some of them distinguished between Christ, whom they acknowledged to be in some sense divine, and the man Jesus, who was at most an instrument through whom the Christ spoke. They held that the man Jesus did not become the bearer or instrument of the Christ until the Spirit descended upon him at his baptism, and that the Spirit left him before the crucifixion, so that the Spirit had only a brief and tenuous association with matter and humanity. Others affirmed that there was never a man Jesus at all, but only the appearance of a man, through which appearance wise teachings were given to the first disciples. Against this the orthodox Christians affirmed that Jesus was conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit (thus denying the Gnostic position that the Spirit had nothing to do with Jesus until his Baptism), that he was born (which meant that he had a real physical body, and not just an appearance) of a virgin (which implied that he had been special from the first moment of his life, and not just from the baptism on).*

- \* Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

*There were many stories then current about gods who died and were resurrected, but they were offered quite frankly as myths, as non-historical stories symbolic of the renewal of the vegetation every spring after the seeming death of winter. If you asked, "When did Adonis die, you would be told either, "Long ago and far away," or else, "His death is not an event in earthly time." Jesus, on the other hand, died at a particular time and place in history, under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea from 26 to 36 CE, or during the last ten years of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius.*

- \* was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into Hades.

*Here the creed hammers home the point that he was really dead. He was not an illusion. He was nailed to a post. He died. He had a real body, a corpse that was placed in a tomb. He was not merely unconscious — his spirit left his body and went to the realm of the dead. It is a common belief among Christians that on this occasion he took the souls of those who had died trusting in the promises made under the Old Covenant — Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others — and brought them out of the realm of the dead and into heavenly glory. But the creed is not concerned with this point. The reference to the descent into Hades (or Hell, or Sheol) is here to make it clear that the death of Jesus was not just a swoon or a coma, but death in every sense of the word.*

- \* The third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven,
- \* and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
- \* From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

- \* I believe in the Holy Ghost,
- \* the holy catholic church,

*The Gnostics believed that the most important Christian doctrines were reserved for a select few. The orthodox belief was that the fullness of the Gospel was to be preached to the entire human race. Hence the term "catholic," or universal, which distinguished them from the Gnostics.*

- \* the communion of saints,
- \* the forgiveness of sins,

*The Gnostics considered that what men needed was not forgiveness, but enlightenment. Ignorance, not sin, was the problem. Some of them, believing the body to be a snare and delusion, led lives of great asceticism. Others, believing the body to be quite separate from the soul, held that it did not matter what the body did, since it was completely foul anyway, and its actions had no effect on the soul. They accordingly led lives that were not ascetic at all. Either way, the notion of forgiveness was alien to them.*

- \* the resurrection of the body,

*The chief goal of the Gnostics was to become free forever from the taint of matter and the shackles of the body, and to return to the heavenly realm as Pure Spirit. They totally rejected any idea of the resurrection of the body.*

- \* and the life everlasting. AMEN. © James Keifer

When the Apostles' Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was truly Man; and the emphases of the Apostles' Creed reflect a concern with repudiating this error.

When the Nicene Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully God. Arius was a presbyter (elder) in Alexandria in Egypt, in the early 300's. He taught that the Father, in the beginning, created (or begot) the Son, and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world. The result of this was to make the Son a created being, and hence not God in any meaningful sense. It was also suspiciously like the theories of those Gnostics and pagans who held that God was too perfect to create something like a material world, and so introduced one or more intermediate beings between God and the world. God created A, who created B, who created C . . . who created Z, who created the world. Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, sent for Arius and questioned him. Arius stuck to his position, and was finally excommunicated by a council of Egyptian bishops. He went to Nicomedia in Asia, where he wrote letters defending his position to various bishops. Finally,

the Emperor Constantine summoned a council of Bishops in Nicea (across the straits from modern Istanbul), and there in 325 the Bishops of the Church, by a decided majority, repudiated Arius and produced the first draft of what is now called the Nicene Creed. A chief spokesman for the full deity of Christ was Athanasius, deacon of Alexandria, assistant (and later successor) to the aging Alexander. The Arian position has been revived in our own day by the Watchtower Society (the JW's), who explicitly hail Arius as a great witness to the truth. (James E. Keifer)

Here is the Creed of Eusebius of Cæsarea, which he presented to the council, and which some suppose to have suggested the creed finally adopted by the council of Nicea.

We believe in one only God, Father Almighty, Creator of things visible and invisible; and in the Lord Jesus Christ, for he is the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, life of life, his only Son, the first-born of all creatures, begotten of the Father before all time, by whom also everything was created, who became flesh for our redemption, who lived and suffered amongst men, rose again the third day, returned to the Father, and will come again one day in his glory to judge the quick and the dead. We believe also in the Holy Ghost. We believe that each of these three is and subsists; the Father truly as Father, the Son truly as Son, the Holy Ghost truly as Holy Ghost; as our Lord also said, when he sent his disciples to preach: Go and teach all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

As can be seen from the discussion by Keifer, the evolving theology and dogma of the church was responding to ever changing beliefs. And, it is understandable that some of the major players in the development of New Testament Canon should also be participants in the discussion of what proto-orthodox belief is and how that belief would be articulated. I will not present any biographical sketches of the major participants since that has already been done in the attachment to our study in the development of New Testament Canon.

During the early years of the Christian church it was a great time to be a theologian. As we have seen in our earlier studies, Paul was the first Christian and he spent a great deal of his time developing a theology to explain Christianity to the converts. And later, Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine wrote extensively in both defenses of the Faith and to further develop the theology of early Christianity. It is from this group that we come to the author of our final and longest Creed, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 297-373).

As Bishop of Alexandria from 328 until his death, Athanasius was a fierce opponent of Arianism and attended the Council of Nicea. Justo Gonzales writes: "The roots of the Arian controversy are to be found in theological development that took place long before the time of Constantine. Indeed, the controversy was a direct result of the manner in which Christians came to think of the nature of God, thanks to the work of Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and others." This is a result of early Christians setting out to preach their message and being accused of *atheism* because they had no visible gods. To defend their positions these early Christians appealed to authorities who the ancients considered wise. These best pagan philosophers had taught that above the entire cosmos there was a supreme being. Appealing to such respected authorities, Christians argued that they believed in the supreme being of the philosophers, and that was what

they meant when they spoke of God. Such an argument was very convincing, and there is no doubt that it contributed to the acceptance of Christianity among the intelligentsia.

But this was also a dangerous argument. Since those philosophers conceived of perfection as immutable, impassable, and fixed, many Christians came to the conclusion that such was the God of Scripture. Two means were found to bring together what the bible says about God and the classical notion of the Supreme Being as impassible and fixed. These two means were allegorical interpretation of scriptural passages, and the Doctrine of Logos. The allegorical interpretation was fairly simple to apply. Whenever Scripture says something 'unworthy' of God- that is something not worthy of the perfection of supreme being- such words are not to be taken literally. And so for instance if the bible says that God walked in the garden, or that god spoke, one is to remember that an immutable being does not really walk or speak. Intellectually, this satisfied many minds. But, emotionally it left much to be desired, for the life of the church was based on the faith that it was possible to have a direct relationship with a personal God, and this supreme being of the philosophers was in no way personal.

But, there was another way to resolve this conflict between the philosophical idea of a supreme being and the witness of scripture. This was the *Doctrine of Logos*, as developed by Justin, Clement, Origen and others. According to this view, although it is true that the supreme being- the- 'Father'- is immutable, impassible, and so on, there was a Logos, Word, or Reason of God, and this is the personal, capable of direct relations with the world and with humans. Thus, according to Justin, when the bible says that God spoke to Moses, what it meant was that the Logos of God spoke to him.

Because of the influence of Origen and his disciples these views had become widespread in the Eastern wing of the church, that portion that spoke Greek rather than Latin. The generally accepted view was that, between the immutable One and the mutable world, there was the Word or Logos of God. It was within this context that the Arian controversy took place. And the seeds for what would blossom into a full schism in 1054.

Having considered this background material, let us examine the Athanasian Creed. Just as the Apostle's Creed was not composed by the 12 Apostles, it is now considered fact that the Athanasian Creed was not written by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. The three most compelling arguments for this are: The creed was written in Latin, the language of the western church; it is not mentioned by Athanasius or any of his contemporaries; and, it is not mentioned in any records of the ecumenical councils. As we saw in the writings of Paul and several early patristic writers it would appear that the Athanasian Creed is yet another example of pseudepigraphy. What is more important is the clear exposition of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, with a passing reference to several other dogmas. Unlike the two other creeds, it deals almost exclusively with the two fundamental truths which it states and restates in varied forms so as to bring out unmistakably the trinity of the Persons of God, and the twofold nature in the one Divine Person of Jesus Christ.

The first half of the creed boldly confesses the Trinity, with some didactic repetition. While it proclaims the Trinity, it also asserts that there are not three distinct Gods, but three Gods in one.

Its teaching about Jesus Christ is more detailed than in the Nicene Creed, and reflects the teaching of the Council of Ephesus (431) and the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451). The Athanasian Creed also uses the Nicene term *homoousios* (one substance, one in Being) not only in respect to the relation of the Son to the Father according to his divine nature, but that of homoousios with his mother Mary according to his human nature.

The Creed's wording thus excludes not only [Sabellianism](#) and [Arianism](#), but the Christological heresies of [Nestorianism](#) and [Eutychianism](#). A need for a clear confession against Arianism arose in western Europe when the [Ostragoths](#) and [Visigoths](#), who had Arian beliefs, invaded at the beginning of the 5th century.

The final section of this Creed also moved beyond the Nicene (and Apostles') Creeds in making negative statements about the people's fate: "They that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire." (Wikipedia)

Unlike the two other creeds, the Athanasian contains damnatory or minatory clauses, which are pronouncements of the penalties which follow the rejection of what is proposed for our correct belief in the body of the creed. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that these clauses are, "the credal equivalent of our Lord's words: "He that believeth not shall be condemned."

So, while the Nicene Council institutionalized widely held beliefs and formally opposed theologically divergent doctrines. The creed was attributed to Athanasius as a sign of its intense orthodoxy of Trinitarian belief. Were you to ask most Christians today, "who was Athanasius?" or "what does the Athanasian Creed proclaim?" you would probably get blank stares at best. But since Philip Melancthon included it in the Augsburg Confession and Martin Luther in the Smalcald Articles, as Lutherans we are bound to confess the three creeds, even if we don't recite the one very often, if at all.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dix, Dom Gregory, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Continuum, London, 2005.

Gonzalez, Justo L., *The Story of Christianity*, Harper San Francisco, 1984.

Hanson, Bradley C., *Introduction to Christian Theology*, Augsburg Fortress MN, 1989.

Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, Fortress, MN, 2000.

Catholic Encyclopedia, [www.newadvent.org/cathen](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen).

Wikipedia.

# APPENDIX I

## TEXTS OF THE THREE CREEDS

### **The Apostle's Creed**

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen

### **The Nicene Creed**

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory

to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son].  
With the Father and the Son  
he is worshipped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. AMEN.

### **The Athanasian Creed**

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith.

Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,  
neither blending their persons  
nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,  
the person of the Son is another,  
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.  
But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,  
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has.

The Father is uncreated,  
the Son is uncreated,  
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable,  
the Son is immeasurable,  
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal,  
the Son is eternal,  
the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings;  
there is but one eternal being.  
So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings;  
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty,  
the Son is almighty,  
the Holy Spirit is almighty.  
Yet there are not three almighty beings;  
there is but one almighty being.

Thus the Father is God,  
the Son is God,  
the Holy Spirit is God.  
Yet there are not three gods;  
there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord,  
the Son is Lord,  
the Holy Spirit is Lord.  
Yet there are not three lords;  
there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us  
to confess each person individually  
as both God and Lord,  
so catholic religion forbids us  
to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone.  
The Son was neither made nor created;  
he was begotten from the Father alone.  
The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;  
he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers;  
there is one Son, not three sons;  
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,  
nothing is greater or smaller;  
in their entirety the three persons  
are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier,  
we must worship their trinity in their unity  
and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved  
should think thus about the trinity.

But it is necessary for eternal salvation  
that one also believe in the incarnation  
of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.

Now this is the true faith:

That we believe and confess  
that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son,  
is both God and human, equally.

He is God from the essence of the Father,  
begotten before time;  
and he is human from the essence of his mother,  
born in time;  
completely God, completely human,  
with a rational soul and human flesh;  
equal to the Father as regards divinity,  
less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human,  
yet Christ is not two, but one.  
He is one, however,  
not by his divinity being turned into flesh,  
but by God's taking humanity to himself.  
He is one,  
certainly not by the blending of his essence,  
but by the unity of his person.  
For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh,  
so too the one Christ is both God and human.

He suffered for our salvation;  
he descended to hell;  
he arose from the dead;  
he ascended to heaven;  
he is seated at the Father's right hand;  
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
At his coming all people will arise bodily  
and give an accounting of their own deeds.

Those who have done good will enter eternal life,  
and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith:  
one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

## STUDY QUESTIONS FOR THE CREEDS

1. Do we need to recite the creeds today, since all those heresies are long gone?
2. How comfortable do you think most worshippers would be with the length of the Athanasian Creed, if were used in worship?
3. Why do you think the Athanasian Creed was included in the Augsburg Confession?
4. How strongly do you feel about the 'statements' made in any of the three creeds?
5. How would you write the creeds if you were composing them today?
6. What do you think about when we recite the creed during worship?
7. Have you given much thought to the creeds since confirmation class?