

The Creeds of the Church

Session 1—Introduction: The Apostles' Creed

I. Introduction

A. What is a “creed”?

The word “creed” comes from the Latin word, *credo*, which means, “I believe.” Thus, a creed is a statement of belief. It seeks to take biblical truths and express them in ways that are as clear and unmistakable as possible.

B. Why are creeds important?

Those of us who are not in liturgical churches are sometimes wary of creeds and other kinds of statements of faith. Sometimes we think that such statements are adding complications to the otherwise simple faith presented in the Bible. Such a position actually shows how little we have actually thought through the different things that the Bible says. People have been misapplying the Bible for thousands of years, and therefore it is necessary to say, as clearly as possible, what we believe the Bible says. Such statements are creeds.

Even the Bible records basic creeds that the early church used in its worship. Consider the following verse:

Deuteronomy 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

1 Timothy 3:16 Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

Furthermore, even the old maxim: “I have no creed but the Bible,” is a creed in its own right, inasmuch as it expresses a belief about the sufficiency and clarity of the Bible. There are at least 3 reasons we can give for the importance of creeds.

1. Creeds provide clarity of doctrine.

The doctrines set forth in the Bible are not always as simple as we might wish they were. For example, the Bible says in many places that God is one; that there is only one God. In other places, the Bible says that the Father is to be worshiped as God, and that the Son is rightfully worshiped as God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. So just how simple is it? We can all agree that what the Bible *says* is true, but creeds give us the opportunity to clarify what we think the Bible *means* by what it says.

2. Creeds provide boundaries for our speculation.

As we read and study the Bible and, hopefully, read and study other commentators and theologians, we will spend time thinking about what the Bible says. In such thinking, it is natural for us to try to puzzle out certain questions on our own. In what way is Jesus fully God and fully man? What does the Bible mean when it calls some people elect? What exactly will happen to me when I die? These are all good questions to ask. But as we struggle to answer them biblically, it is helpful to see how the Church has answered them before. If we arrive at a conclusion that other Christians throughout the history of the Church have rejected, then we should stop and ask whether it is very likely that we've hit upon the right answer when other, wiser, godlier people than we have thought differently.

3. Creeds provide links to previous ages of the Church.

It is unfortunate that we have forgotten the joy of reciting creeds in our public services of worship. When we say the words of these ancient creeds, we are verbalizing ideas that Christians have verbalized for (in some cases) thousands of years. There's something powerful about that. We are part of a long chain of believers that stretches back to Jesus and the apostles.

C. The authority of the creeds

As protestants we do not hold the creeds to have an authority above or even equal to the Bible. Their value is always commensurate with their adherence to the biblical revelation. Other branches of the church have elevated such statements above where they ought to be, and in response, Protestants have often rejected the creeds entirely. But there is value in the creeds, if they are kept in their proper place.

II. The Apostles' Creed

A. Its history

The legend of the Creed states that the apostles composed it on the Day of Pentecost, to insure a unity in their teaching before they dispersed to preach the gospel. According to this legend, each of the twelve apostles wrote one clause of the Creed. **Notice any inconsistencies with this legend?**

The first and most glaring fact about the Apostles' Creed is that it was not written by the apostles. There is a Latin text of the Creed that dates back to 390 AD, and a Greek text that dates back even further. Most historians believe that the earliest version of this creed was already in use by the second century.

There is no question that the contents of the Creed are easily derived from the Scriptures. The Creed was probably used as an early worship form, much as I Timothy 3:16 would have been used. It was not born out of controversy about the meaning of Scripture, and thus does not deal categorically with issues such as the divinity of Jesus or the Spirit, or other matters, like later creeds do.

B. Its text

1. What it says about God the Father

God is named as “almighty” (all-powerful) and as the one who originally created all things (“maker of heaven and earth”).

2. What it says about God the Son

The creed spends most of its space on Jesus, about whom it says 10 things:

- a.) He is God's only Son.
- b.) He is our Lord (Master, *contra* the emperor worship of the day).
- c.) He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (speaking of his divinity).
- d.) He was born of the Virgin Mary (speaking of the virgin birth and humanity of Christ).
- e.) He suffered under Pontius Pilate (the historicity of his death).
- f.) He was truly dead (“crucified, dead, and buried.”)
- g.) He rose from the dead (“on the third day”—speaking again to the historicity of the events described).
- h.) He sits at the right hand of the Father (explaining his current location and his current ministry).
- i.) He will come again.
- j.) He will judge all people.

3. What it says about God the Holy Spirit

While the Creed doesn't say much about the Holy Spirit, it mentions him in order to reinforce the Trinitarian understanding of the Bible (though this would come into dispute in later years).

4. What it says about other important matters

In a kind of “mop-up” fashion, the Creed mentions 5 other matters, each of which follows the other in logical progression:

- a.) “The holy, catholic church”—this refers to the universal church, expressing the reality that Jesus died to redeem one body.
- b.) “The communion of saints”—that all believers are one in the body.
- c.) “The forgiveness of sins”—Jesus’ death accomplished a real forgiveness, freeing us from the penalty of our sins forever.
- d.) “The resurrection of the body”—our eternal state will not be one of ethereal, bodiless floating but of real, physical perfection. We are bodily creatures & will live bodily in perfection as Jesus does now.
- e.) “The life everlasting”—a real, eternal, never-ending future.

Text in Latin

Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem,
Creatorem caeli et terrae,

et in Iesum Christum, Filium Eius unicum,
Dominum nostrum, qui conceptus est de
Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria Virgine,
passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus,
mortuus, et sepultus, descendit ad infernos,
tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, ascendit ad
caelos, sedet ad dexteram Dei Patris
omnipotentis, inde venturus est iudicare
vivos et mortuos.

Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam
Ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum
communione, remissionem peccatorum,
carnis resurrectionem, vitam aeternam.
Amen.

Text in English

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; (he descended to the dead.) On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Text in Greek

Πιστεύω εἰς θεὸν πατέρα
παντοκράτορά ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς

Καὶ, εἰς Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν
μονογενῆ τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν τὸν
συλληφθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου
γεννηθέντα ἐκ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου
παθόντα ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου
σταυρωθέντά θανόντά καὶ ταφέντά
κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατά τῆ τρίτη
ἡμέρα ἀναστάντα ἀπὸ τῶν νεκρῶν
ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς
καθεζόμενον ἐν δεξιᾷ θεοῦ πατρὸς
παντοδυναμοῦ ἐκεῖθεν ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι
ζῶντας καὶ νεκροὺς

Πιστεύω εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἁγίαν
καθολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἁγίων κοινωνίαν
ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν σαρκὸς ἀνάστασιν
ζωὴν αἰώνιον
Ἀμήν