

CHURCH HISTORY: THE APOSTLES' CREED

As the Christian church spread throughout the Roman world in the first century, and as the first leaders died out, there was a practical need for local churches to have a basic statement of beliefs. As false teachers began to bring in strange ideas, Christians needed to know “Just what is it that we believe?”

Some of these churches had a few books of the New Testament, perhaps some of Paul's letters or one of the four Gospels. But none of the churches had all the New Testament. They needed a standard to judge whether a teaching was truth, or heresy. The early Christians also realized that new people didn't have to know everything before they could be baptized and accepted as believers. How much should they know and accept before being admitted into the church? This was another reason that early churches wanted a brief statement of what they believed to be most essential.

Churches in different cities and regions made their own lists, which had many points in common, since all the churches had traditions tracing back to the apostles in one way or another. The small differences were eventually eliminated as church leaders discussed these things with one another. They shared not only the scriptures they had, but also their statements of faith.

When Christianity became a legal religion in the fourth century, this process became easier. Churches throughout the empire agreed on which books should form the New Testament, and they agreed on several basic statements of faith.

A summary of apostolic teaching

One of the doctrinal lists commonly used in the Western empire was called the Apostles' Creed. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe." It was called "Apostles" not because the apostles themselves wrote it (although some people may have thought this), but because the Creed was believed to be an accurate summary of what the apostles taught.

As a public statement of faith, the Creed was useful in several ways:

- standardized way in which new people could confess their faith in Jesus Christ.
- The Creed anchored Christian faith to a tradition, to make it difficult for people or churches to be led astray by strange doctrines.
- The Creed was a preaching and teaching tool, giving an outline for further discipleship.
- The Creed was memorized through frequent repetition, which helped the many believers who could not read.
- The Creed provided a doctrinal basis for different churches to accept one another, and to reject those who did not accept the basic truths.
- The Bible itself contains brief creed-like statements ([1 Corinthians 8:6](#); [15:3-4](#); [1 Timothy 3:16](#)). The early church leaders also wrote short creeds, perhaps as baptism ceremonies. These eventually were recited by congregations in their worship services.

Writing in Greek somewhere around the year 200, Irenaeus describes a creed that has some similarities to the Apostles' Creed, and may have been a precursor. He presented his creed not as something new, but as something the church had been using for a long time. He lived in what is now France, but had grown up in Asia Minor, where he had been taught by Polycarp, a student of the apostle John.

An early Latin version of the Creed is in the writings of Tertullian, from North Africa, about the year 220. About a century later, Marcellus, from Asia Minor, had a similar creed. In A.D. 390, after study in Rome, Egypt and Judea, Rufinus had a similar creed in northern Italy.

Augustine, bishop in North Africa in 400, had a nearly identical creed, and it was apparently standard in Gaul in 650. The text accepted today is identical to what was written in 750 by Pirminius, who lived in what is now Switzerland.

This history shows that churches in many different regions were involved in the development of the Apostles' Creed. As churches in one part of the empire communicated with others, their short list of doctrines became standardized.

What does the Creed say?

Let us look at what the Creed says, and comment on some of its points. It is short, so we'll begin by quoting all of it.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth; I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He 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, and is seated at the right hand of Father. He will come again 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. (Translation by the International Consultation on English Texts)

The Creed, although having a Trinitarian structure, is not explicitly Trinitarian. The Creed began to be developed before the Trinitarian controversy arose, and the Creed (unlike the Nicene Creed) was not an attempt to correct a specific heresy.

Numerous scriptures could be mentioned as support for the various points of the Creed. The Creed was believed to be in full agreement with the apostolic writings, and the same churches accepted both the Creed and the Scriptures as authoritative, as faithful reports of what the apostles taught.

The Creed begins with a simple statement of faith in God, who has all power and is the originator of everything. This statement is a rejection of pagan mythologies, but it was acceptable to Jews and to some of the more educated Greeks.

Most of the Creed is about Jesus Christ, for he is the definitive doctrine of the faith. Beliefs about Jesus separate Christians from everyone else. Jesus was a specific person, born of a woman, executed under a specific Roman governor. Unlike mythological deities, he did not come from the distant and hazy past — he interacted with the real world. He had a real body that was born, crucified and buried, and yet he was divine, too — conceived by the Holy Spirit, resurrected, ascended into heaven at a position of supreme power. He is the unique Son of God, a unique Lord who is above all earthly lords, and he is the Judge who will return to earth to determine everyone's reward.

The early church knew about Jesus' earthly ministry and his miracles, but they did not feel that these were essential to the Christian faith. The Creed focuses more on his supernatural birth, his death and his supernatural power. These are of greatest theological significance, and were therefore included in the statement of faith.

'Descended to the dead'

The phrase "descended to the dead" is of special interest, in part because it used to be translated "descended into hell." Some medieval theologians came up with elaborate theories about what Jesus did in hell, but this misses the original purpose of the phrase.

Irenaeus and Tertullian do not have this phrase; it first appears in the writings of Rufinus, who said that it meant only that Jesus went to the grave, the "place" of the dead. This is in agreement with Scripture, which says that Jesus rose from "the dead" (a plural adjective used as a noun, meaning the situation that all dead people are in, as in [Acts 4:10](#)).

Peter applied the words of Psalm 16 to Jesus: “You will not abandon me to the grave” — to Hades, the realm of the dead. When Jesus was dead, he was in Hades. Some believe he was conscious, and others believe he was not, but either way, he was in Hades, the realm of the dead.

The phrase “descended to the dead” disappeared from the creed for more than 200 years. Augustine did not have it. It occurs again in the Gallic Creed of 650 and remained from then on.

Some are troubled by this phrase and its history in the Creed; others are troubled by ancient and modern misinterpretations of the phrase. Some would prefer it be eliminated, since it does not add anything essential to the Creed, and is a point of disagreement rather than agreement.

Wayne Grudem argues:

Unlike every other phrase in the Creed, it represents not some major doctrine on which all Christians agree, but rather a statement about which most Christians seem to disagree. It is at best confusing and in most cases misleading for modern Christians. My own judgment is that there would be all gain and no loss if it were dropped from the Creed once for all. (*Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, 583-594)

Nevertheless, the words are in the Creed, and we cannot change the tradition. However, we can understand the words correctly so we can agree with them. Others may interpret these words differently, but we do not need to argue about that.

‘The holy catholic church’

The Creed ends with a few brief statements. We can easily agree to a belief in the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection and eternal life. (Some may question “resurrection of the body.” First Corinthians 15 says that our body will be transformed to be spiritual rather than fleshly, but it will still be our body.)

Some people are also put off by the words “holy catholic church.” The word catholic comes from the Greek words *kat’ holos*, literally meaning “according to the whole,” or in actual use, worldwide or universal. The word catholic became part of the Creed before “catholic” became associated with the Roman church, and many Protestant churches use the Creed with the word catholic. In the Creed, we do not express faith in a specific denomination, but in the church worldwide — that is, that there is one body, united by God’s Spirit. The phrase “communion of saints” implies the same thing — that as we all commune or have unity with Christ through the Holy Spirit, we also commune with each other. We will be united to one another forever.

The Apostles’ Creed has been part of the Western church tradition for many centuries. It has not been perfect, but it has been useful for Christian confession, doctrine and discipleship. We accept the creed as a valid statement of faith for Christians.