

Apostles Creed (c. 150)

Pressing Matters/Questions:

As the first generation of Jesus-followers began to die, the second generation felt a pressing need to create a statement which sought to capture the essence of the Apostles' teaching for future generations.

Results:

The Apostles Creed is our earliest full declaration of the Christian faith. It is very old and widely used within the church to establish our basic convictions.

Importance:

How do we know that we are Christians? Three ways: communion, practice and doctrine. We have communion with Christ (a personal relationship) as well as with the church, we follow Christ in our day-to-day practices, and we hold onto right doctrine. Creeds address this third area; they were written with the assumption that all Christians everywhere and at all times would agree with them. Most other Christian creeds follow the structure of the Apostles Creed.

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 of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hell, on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into Heaven and sitteth at that right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick¹ and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church,² the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

¹ This older word just means those who are living at that time or 'quickenened.'

² The word "catholic" with a lower case 'c' does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but to the universal Christian church. Another appropriate title would be "the one holy church" or "the holy apostolic church." This creed was written prior to the establishment of the branch of Christianity we would call the "Catholic Church."

First Ecumenical Council

Nicaea I (325)

Pressing Matters/Questions:

A presbyter (preacher) named Arius had begun to proclaim that the Son of God was not of the same nature of God (not wholly God) but that God had created the Son (this is called Arianism).

Results:

The council upheld the belief that Christ was of the same nature of God (see the underlined section of the creed below).

Importance:

That Jesus was not only sent by God but is the same “substance” as God is important to our understanding of salvation and atonement. Only God can save humanity, so it was important to the early church that it was *God* who entered hell and destroyed sin. Otherwise Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection are inspirational but devoid of any true redemptive value.

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 Being¹ 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. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.² 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.

¹ The word could also be translated as “substance” or “essence.”

² The word “catholic” with a lower case ‘c’ does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but to the universal Christian church. Another appropriate title would be “the one holy church” or “the one, holy apostolic church.” This creed was written prior to the establishment of what we would call the “Catholic Church.”

Second Ecumenical Council

Constantinople I (381)

Pressing Matters/Questions:

While the council at Nicaea had condemned Arianism, it did not go far enough to stop its spread. Over time, Arian thought developed further and found some support from Roman emperors, this second council was called to shore up the anti-Arian position.

Results:

The council upheld the creed of Nicaea and enforced it with stronger language.

Importance:

As discussed by the council of Nicaea, Jesus being the same substance as God is essential to our understanding of salvation. This council felt that the threat to this belief was so strong that they reinforced this doctrine as strongly as they could. Arianism largely went into obscurity after this council (though variants of the belief have continued until the present day).

Creed:

I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light; True God of True God; begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried. And the third day He arose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spoke by the prophets.

And in One, Holy, catholic, and Apostolic church.¹ I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

¹ The word "catholic" with a lower case 'c' does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but to the universal Christian church. Another appropriate title would be "the one holy church" or "the one, holy apostolic church." This creed was written prior to the establishment of what we would call the "Catholic Church."

Third Ecumenical Council

Ephesus I (431)

Pressing Matters/Questions:

Nestorius, the bishop at Constantinople, had been teaching that Mary should be called “Christotokos” (Christ-birther) instead of “Theotokos” (God-birther), seeming to imply that while Christ was fully God at some point, He was not fully God at conception, nor at His death because God cannot be “born” or “die.” Cyril, the rival bishop at Alexandria, objected to this claim and their dispute eventually resulted in a council being called to determine the outcome.

Results:

The council largely sided with Cyril and rejected Nestorius’s views. They maintained that it is appropriate to call Mary the “Mother of God.”

Importance:

The fact that three ecumenical councils over the period of a hundred years dealt with Jesus’s divinity is telling as to how difficult it was for some to accept this tenant. Furthermore, the fact that all three councils affirmed Jesus’s divinity should stand as a testament to how important it is also for us to accept this tenant of faith.

Canon VII:¹

WHEN these things had been read, the holy Synod decreed that it is unlawful for any man to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different Faith as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicaea.

But those who shall dare to compose a different faith, or to introduce or offer it to persons desiring to turn to the acknowledgment of the truth, whether from Heathenism or from Judaism, or from any heresy whatsoever, shall be deposed, if they be bishops or clergymen; bishops from the episcopate and clergymen from the clergy; and if they be laymen, they shall be anathematized.²

¹ There was no new creed established at this council, but the Nicene Creed was once again affirmed. The council issued eight canons essentially condemning Nestorius as well as another heresy known as Pelagianism.

² Being “anathematized” means to be excommunicated and would put someone not only outside of the community of believers but disconnected from the body of Christ.

Fourth Ecumenical Council:

Chalcedon (451)¹

Pressing Matters/Questions:

Having accepted that Jesus was fully God and fully human the next question was: How should we understand the relationship between these two “natures” (Divine and human)? When Jesus performed miracles, was that his “Divine” nature acting outside his “human” one? When he died, was that his “human” nature acting outside his “Divine”? Did one over-power the other?

Results:

The council ratified a document sent by Pope Leo I (called the *Tome*) and issued a statement describing Jesus’s two natures (the important line is underlined below).

Importance:

It is important that Christ’s natures were not confused so that we can properly say (with equal confidence) that Jesus endured all of our humanity, yet was fully Divine.

Statement:²

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

¹ There are three more councils recognized as ecumenical: Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680), Nicaea II (787). Although these councils are accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, they are not fully accepted by Protestants. Because we are a Protestant church, it is not required that you are in line with the latter three councils. You are encouraged to research them yourself to determine your level of acceptance.

² Instead of issuing a creed, the council provided a “statement” or “definition” regarding the two natures of Christ.