



# The Apostles' Creed

## Study 1: An Introduction ( 1Cor. 15:1-11)

o The Apostles' Creed is the best known and oldest of the historic creeds that define the true Christian faith over against heretical teachings and other religions.

### I. Origin.

1. *What are creeds?* Creeds are short statements of faith used by the early church to distinguish itself from those who hold to heretical teachings and from other religions.
  - Catechisms are instructional manuals, couched in questions and answers, used in baptismal classes and families. Confessions of Faith are longer statements of doctrine used by churches to declare their orthodoxy and distinctive characteristics over against the teaching of other churches. Confessions of Faith were drawn up during and after the Reformation of the 16th century.
2. *Why focus on the Apostles' Creed?* There are three well-known historic creeds - the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Nicene Creed.
  - The oldest and most well-known is the Apostles' Creed. Many of the later creeds were based on this one. The Roman Catholic Church holds the unfounded view that each of the twelve apostles of Christ contributed a statement to this Creed. The Apostles' Creed existed as early as the middle of the 2nd century (around 140 AD), when the disciples of the apostles were still alive. Its final, slightly expanded, form may be traced up to the 7th century.
  - The Athanasian Creed is named after Athanasius (A.D. 293-373), the champion of orthodoxy against Arian attacks on the doctrine of the trinity. This Creed is not recognised by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Longer than the Apostles' Creed, it consists of two main parts. The first part sets forth the doctrine of the Trinity, and the second part deals with the two natures of Christ.
  - The Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), revised by the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), and reaffirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). The inclusion of the "filioque" phrase in 589, describing the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father "and the Son", is rejected by the Eastern Orthodox churches. The controversy over the "filioque" phrase, together with other doctrinal and political issues, were to lead to the official separation of the church into East (the Orthodox Churches) and West (the Roman Catholic Church) in AD 1054.
3. *Is it right to use a creed produced by the early church?* We have referred to the church Councils of the past. These so-call "ecumenical councils" must not be confused with the modern ecumenical movement.

- The early church councils, consisting of church leaders, were called only when necessary, to discuss doctrinal matters that threatened the peace of the church. The purpose was to expose errors and to establish the truth.
- The modern ecumenical movement, consists of fixed organisations such as the World Council of Churches and other smaller, national, bodies that are formed to show forth unity between churches. Inevitably, the pursuit of visible unity is at the expense of truth. Generally, Reformed churches shun the ecumenical movement and pursue selective fellowship based on the truth.
- The historic creeds were produced by the early ecumenical councils, before the churches became distinctly differentiated into “establishment churches” (or “sacral churches”) and “dissenting churches”. With time, such councils departed from spiritual objectives due to the heavy involvement of the civil authorities. As a result of persecution, the “dissenting churches” were driven underground.
- Due to the prevalence of the cults - both old and new ones - and the pervasive presence of other religions, the historic creeds remain useful to protect the church from wrong teaching and to call others to the Christian faith.

## **II. Structure and content.**

1. Three parts of unequal length are found in the Apostles’ Creed, each beginning with the phrase “We believe” (or “I believe” when used personally).
  - The first part concerns God the Father. The second, and longest, part concerns Jesus Christ the Son of God. The third part concerns the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In view of its later development into the Nicene Creed, in which the doctrine of the Trinity is distinguished from the doctrine of the church, we may say that there are four parts in the creed.
2. The value of the Apostles’ Creed has been recognised by many.
  - The structure of the Apostles’ Creed was used by John Calvin as the organising principle of his *magnum opus*, “The Institutes of the Christian Religion”, consisting of four “books”. Book I is concerned with the knowledge of God as Creator, Preserver, and Governor of all things created. Book II is concerned with the knowledge of God as manifested in Christ, the Redeemer of sinners. Book III is concerned with the Holy Spirit who regenerates sinners and unite them to Christ. Book IV is concerned with the Church and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, used by the Holy Spirit to sustain the faith of God’s people.
  - The Heidelberg Catechism of the Continental Reformed churches is basically an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed. Zacharius Ursinus, the primary author of that Catechism, tells us that, “It signifies a brief and summary form of the Christian faith, which distinguishes the church and her members from the various sects” (Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, p. 117).
3. We do not treat the creeds, catechisms and confessions of faith as infallible. However, they are useful in so far as they accurately teach the doctrine of the Scripture, which is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice.
  - We have noted that many of the later creeds were based on the Apostles’ Creed, including the Nicene Creed. Being a fuller development of the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed should be used to understand and interpret the earlier creed. However, the earlier creed is more concise, and easier to be memorised.
  - Comparison between the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed:

Apostles' Creed	Nicene Creed
We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.	We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.
We believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to hell.	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.
The third day He rose again from the dead.	Through Him all things were made.
He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.	For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven; He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and was made human.
From there He will come to judge the living and the dead.	He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried.
	The third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures.
	He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom will never end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit,	And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.
	He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
	He spoke through the prophets.
the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.	We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
	We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
	We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and to life in the world to come. Amen.

= As with the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed should be memorised by all Christians. Although the words of the Apostles' Creed are not Scriptures, they summarise well the core teaching of the Scripture.

### Review Questions

1. State what are Creeds, Catechisms, and Confessions of Faith.
2. What are the three well-known historic creeds?
3. Which historic creed is not recognised by the Eastern Orthodox churches?

4. What phrase in the Nicene Creed is rejected by the Eastern Orthodox churches?
5. How is the modern ecumenical movement different from the ecumenical councils of the past?
6. Why are the historic creeds still useful to us?
7. What is each of the four parts of the Apostles' Creed about?
8. Which writing of John Calvin uses the structure of the Apostles' Creed as the organising principle?
9. Which Reformed catechism expounds on the Apostles' Creed?
10. In what ways is the Apostles' Creed superior to the other historic creeds?

### **Assignment/Discussion**

There are Christians who declare that they hold to “No creed but the Bible”. This sounds so pious and correct, but what dangers are there in holding to such a sentiment?

### **Memory Passage (1 Cor. 15:1-4)**

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

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