

ZONDERVAN

Know the Creeds and Councils
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INTRODUCTION

What Are Creeds, Confessions, Catechisms, and Councils?

Tradition is the fruit of the Spirit's teaching activity from the ages as God's people have sought understanding of Scripture. It is not infallible, but neither is it negligible, and we impoverish ourselves if we disregard it.

— J. I. Packer, "Upholding the Unity of Scripture Today"

Obviously, Christianity did not begin when we were born. Nor did our generation invent Christian thought. We live two thousand years removed from the time of our founder, and — for better or for worse — we are the recipients of a long line of Christians' insights, mistakes, and ways of speaking about God and the Christian faith. Today's Christianity is directly affected by what earlier Christians chose to do and to believe.

The fact that Christianity developed — that the sixteenth century, for instance, looked very different from the third, and that both looked very different from the twenty-first — can sometimes lead us to wonder what the essential core of Christianity is. As a result,

some people decide to ignore history altogether and try to reconstruct “real Christianity” with nothing more than a Bible. But this approach misses a great deal. Christians of the past were no less concerned with being faithful to God than we are, and they sought to fit together all that Scripture has to say about the mysteries of Christianity — the incarnation, the Trinity, predestination, and more — with all the intellectual power of their times. To ignore these insights is to attempt to reinvent the wheel, and to risk reinventing it badly.

The main difficulty is untangling the language of the church of the past, particularly for those of us who do not have time or energy to devote to historical studies. The goal of this book is to guide readers past that difficulty and to provide an overview of the main historical developments in Christian thought. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to *all* creeds, councils, confessions, and catechisms; that would take nothing less than an encyclopedia. However, I hope that after reading this book you will come away with a deeper and better understanding of how the church has wrestled with what continue to be the most important questions about Christian belief.

The chapters are brief and to the point. For each creed, confession, catechism, or council, I present historical background, a short summary of the content, and thoughts on contemporary relevance. At the end of each chapter are discussion questions and recommended reading for further study.

Before we examine the history itself, it will be important to learn the four major terms that you will encounter in this book. Each one represents a tool that the church has used to speak about God clearly and faithfully, to guide its members closer to God, and sometimes to distinguish authentic Christianity from the innovations, heresies, and false teachings that the New Testament warns of. While their purposes differ, all try to communicate complex theological ideas to people who don't have sophisticated theological backgrounds (in some cases, to people who are illiterate). The four terms are “creeds,” “confessions,” “catechisms,” and “councils.”

Creeds

I believe in God,
 The Father Almighty
 Maker of Heaven and Earth
 Of all that is seen and unseen . . .

— Opening lines of the Nicene Creed, AD 325

The English word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means “I believe.” Church historian J. N. D. Kelly says that a creed is “a fixed formula summarizing the essential articles of the Christian religion and enjoying the sanction of ecclesiastical [church] authority.”¹ More simply, the creeds set forth the basic beliefs of the church that have been handed down from earliest times, what the New Testament calls “the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3). When teachers throughout history called parts of this faith into question (usually the parts that were taken for granted or were less well-defined), the early church reaffirmed the essentials in a way that honored the traditional teaching.

The earliest creeds are arguably to be found in Scripture itself. In the Old Testament, what is known as the Shema (“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one,” Deut. 6:4) is a creedlike statement. While there are no official, full-blown creeds in the New Testament, scholar Ralph Martin has suggested that the beginnings of creeds are already present in the New Testament and were developed by early Christians to defend against subtle pagan influences and to establish key beliefs.² Many scholars believe that Paul recites an early creed in his letter to the Corinthians when he summarizes the facts that he taught as “of first importance”: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared [to the apostles and many others]” (1 Cor. 15:3–7). Furthermore, in the church’s acts of baptism, Eucharist, and worship, certain prayers and early creedlike statements of belief were developed, such as “Jesus is

Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3) and the Trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19: “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” While there is no formal creed in the pages of Scripture, the idea of a central, basic teaching of Christianity certainly is.

After the age of the apostles, the early church possessed what is known as “the rule of faith” or “the tradition,” which theologian Bruce Demarest describes as “brief summaries of essential Christian truths.”³ Early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Hippolytus all assume this “rule of faith,” an unwritten set of beliefs that had been passed down from the apostles and taught to Christian converts. In the second century, Irenaeus described the rule of faith in this way: “One God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.”⁴

Irenaeus’s rule of faith sounds quite similar to later formal creeds and contains the essence of the gospel. As the early Christian community dealt with new heretical movements, the rule of faith gave birth to more precise statements of the essentials of the faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.⁵

How Were Creeds Used?

In individualist cultures, we pick and choose what religion we like. More than that, we sometimes combine parts of different denominations or religions to make something entirely new — whatever works for us personally. For the early Christians, however, creeds were meant to be used by groups — not just a summary of what everyone in the room agrees upon but a promise made and kept as a group.

Creeds were initially used in baptism, during which the baptismal candidate recited a formula or responded to questions, thereby publicly confessing belief in Jesus Christ. As time passed, however, the creeds also were used to teach new converts the basic elements of the Christian faith. Since the creeds were relatively short summaries of Christian doctrine, they were easy to learn. The creeds were also used in church liturgies (the set of actions and rituals in a worship service that illustrate Christian beliefs and mysteries), uniting the congregation in common confession. Far from being a device of the ivory tower, creeds were the way that ordinary tradesmen and farmers could learn about and pledge their lives to the God of the Bible.

Nowadays, we have a largely literate population and an ample supply of Bibles, and so it's easy to wonder whether creeds are necessary. Some may even think that the creeds stand in opposition to (or at least in tension with) the authority of Holy Scripture. However, as theologian John Webster says, "We may think of the creed as an aspect of the church's exegetical fellowship, of learning alongside the saints and doctors and martyrs how to give ear to the gospel."⁶ Creeds aren't dogmas that are imposed on Scripture but are themselves drawn from the Bible and provide a touchstone to the faith for Christians of all times and places.

Confessions

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the

same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.

— Opening lines of the Westminster Confession on the purpose of Scripture, AD 1646

What about confessions? In contrast to creeds, which are basic statements of belief, confessions represent more detailed inquiry into the things of God. The great writer C. S. Lewis gave the following illustration to show the value of having confessions as well as creeds: “I hope no reader will suppose that ‘mere’ Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the [confessions] of the existing communions — as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall [creeds], I have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms [confessions], not the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.”⁷

As Lewis's illustration suggests, the creeds are the boundaries of the faith that separate orthodoxy from heresy, while the confessions color in the picture, tying theology to everyday life in all sorts of ways. Because creeds are bare-bones structures (the outlines of the sketch), it makes sense that the earliest statements of the church are creeds, while later statements of particular denominations are confessions. Creeds distinguish orthodoxy from heresy (or Christian faith from non-Christian faith). Confessions distinguish denominational distinctives (or one type of Christian faith from another type of Christian faith).

Christian confessions often define a particular group's belief on secondary issues such as infant baptism, the end times, predestination, the Lord's Supper, and the order of salvation. As a rule, Christian confessions addressed the immediate needs and concerns of those who wrote them. (That is, while the creeds strove to preserve “the faith delivered for all time,” confessions tried to apply the faith to the here and now.) Because confessions often arose out of theo-

logical debate, the issues emphasized in any particular confession may say more about cross-denominational arguments than anything else; hence, although those issues may still be relevant today, they may not be of the same importance as they were long ago.

Some Prominent Confessions

There are, broadly speaking, two different kinds of confessions. The first is meant to distinguish one denomination from another. Examples of this type of confession include the following:

- The Thirty-nine Articles (Anglican, 1563)
- The Formula of Concord (Lutheran, 1577)
- The Arminian Confession of 1621 (Arminian, 1621)
- The Westminster Confession (Presbyterian, 1646)
- The Dordrecht Confession (Anabaptist, 1632)
- The Augsburg Confession (Lutheran, 1530)
- The Scots Confession (Church of Scotland, 1560)
- The Belgic Confession (Reformed, 1561)
- The First and Second Helvetic Confessions (Lutheran, 1536 and 1562)
- The Twenty-five Articles of Religion (Methodist, 1784)
- The Confessions of Trent (Roman Catholic, 1545–63)
- Vatican II (Catholic, 1962–65)

The majority of these confessions arose during the Reformation. As various sects of Reformation Protestantism were coming into existence, they needed to put forth coherent teachings that distinguished their groups from other denominations.

However, because these confessions could not possibly foresee issues that would arise as later churches tried to live faithfully in contemporary culture, a second type of confession came into existence. This type of confession — illustrated by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy and the Lausanne Covenant — puts

forth a specific church's (or group of churches') response to a specific theological issue that is of pressing importance for the contemporary church. This second type of confession is typically supplementary; it is not a complete statement of a specific church's beliefs and doctrines but is instead a collaboration among different churches to address a significant issue. (In the previous two examples, one is a response to biblical criticism and the other to the changing face of world evangelism.)

Use of Confessions

While confessions have not been as relevant to worship services as creeds have (it's rare to find a congregation reciting the Twenty-five Articles of Religion on a given Sunday), they still play an important role in the life of the church. First, confessional statements form the basis of catechisms, which are used to introduce new believers and children to the basic teachings of the church. Second, confessions help a denomination to maintain doctrinal unity by providing a standard to which the teaching of individual congregations should adhere. This standard helps maintain denominational integrity and preserves the ideals of the group against cultural trends or the doctrinal innovations of an individual leader.

Some may worry that church confessions are archaic, that they undermine the overarching unity of the body of Christ, or that they nitpick over relatively insignificant issues of doctrine. While there may be some legitimacy to these critiques, it is important to keep in mind that confessions are meant to be worshipful responses to a truly gracious God. It isn't enough for believers to stop at a basic knowledge of God, as Lewis so shrewdly noted, even though the basics tie together all the variations within orthodox Christianity. God has given us a lot of information about himself that a creed does not cover; it is within confessions that churches interpret that information and show believers how it can help them know God better. Seen in this light, the confessions of the church take on a new

beauty, a beauty that finds its origin in the God of the gospel and in the salvation he offers to his people.

Catechisms

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

— Opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism, AD 1563

A catechism is a book or document giving a brief summary of the basic principles of Christianity in Q&A form. Catechisms represent the practical, “on-the-ground” application of the main teaching agreed upon at church councils and expressed through creeds and confessions. The word “catechism” comes from the Greek word *katechein*, which means “to teach” or “to instruct.” Catechisms are basic outlines of the teachings of the Christian faith, set forth in a way that those unfamiliar with doctrine can easily understand.

Catechisms have been around since the early church, which was quite devoted to instructing new believers in the Christian faith. Since conversion was a radical change from one way of life to another, Cyril of Jerusalem made the following description of the process: “Let me compare the catechizing to a building. Unless we methodically bind and joint the whole structure together, we shall have leaks and dry rot, and all our previous exertions will be wasted.”⁸ The process of catechesis was also alive and well in

the Middle Ages: Aquinas wrote a catechism that was basically an extended explanation of the Apostles' Creed, one of the earliest summaries of the Christian faith.

However, the era most commonly associated with catechisms is the Reformation, “the Golden Age of catechisms.”⁹ In fact, one scholar calls the catechism “the heart of the Reformation.”¹⁰ Martin Luther, who wrote both a small and a large catechism, put the burden of catechizing on parents, not the church: “If everything cannot be covered at once, let one point be taken up today, and tomorrow another [point]. If parents and guardians will not take the trouble to do this, either themselves or through others, there never will be a catechism.”¹¹

John Calvin also thought the process of catechesis was incredibly important.¹² Calvin was concerned that his congregation be instructed in the basic teachings of the gospel so that they could fight off the attacks of Satan. Indeed, Calvin thought that the success of the church was largely dependent on how it catechized its youth, which is why he wrote and revised a catechism for his church. In addition to Calvin and Luther, John Owen and Richard Baxter also wrote a variety of catechisms appropriate for various age groups.

Early Christian catechesis focused on immersion in God's Word, basic instruction in doctrine, and ethical and moral guidelines.¹³ Catechisms in the Reformation were similar, but they implemented a question and answer format that had become popular in the Middle Ages. In this style, the person writing the catechism was able to anticipate questions and objections from those reading the document. Because of the widespread illiteracy during the period of the Reformation, catechesis often took place in face-to-face discussion. This is why “Luther intended his catechism to target primarily pastors, but also parents, and other ‘opinion makers’ who would in turn share the teachings of the catechism orally with children and illiterate members of the household.”¹⁴

Uses of Catechisms

Catechisms are designed to work on multiple levels for learners' best retention. As Nordling notes, "Luther intended that the Small Catechism would come to constitute the Christian's internal 'computer operating system' (for example, DOS, Windows, Mac OS), which would become fixed in the immediate stores of memory, and thereby become the foundation for approaching God and all things spiritual."¹⁵ For instance, the basic content of Luther's smaller catechism was to be memorized first, and the Scripture references supporting the basic answers were to be memorized at a later date. In this way, the catechism provided both an intimate acquaintance with the Bible as well as a guidebook for reading and understanding the Bible.

It is important to remember that catechisms are not meant to be an end in themselves. They are to lead to belief, practice, and love for God. As such, the counterparts to catechisms are confessions. Put most simply, catechisms teach in order that we may confess and believe. John Webster says that "through [a creed or confession] the church affirms its allegiance to God, repudiates the falsehood by which the church is threatened, and assembles around the judgment and consolation of the gospel."¹⁶ However, the activities that Webster describes take place not only in church buildings but also in homes, offices, schools, and private conversations, so catechisms are tools to bring confessional beliefs into our daily lives.

Examples of Catechisms

Perhaps the most common catechisms today are those which are products of the Protestant Reformation: Reformed Westminster Catechism (shorter and larger), the Lutheran Small Catechism in the Book of Concord, and my favorite — the Heidelberg Catechism. While the content of these catechisms is a bit advanced, the introduction to the Westminster Shorter Catechism is an excellent tool for children. The Catechism for Young Children is used in many

denominations as an introduction. Also, author Chris Schlecht has written a children's catechism, which explains the basics of the Reformed faith. The Catechism of the Church of Geneva for children may also be a good choice for parents who want to learn how to teach their children about the faith.

Church Councils

Canon 1

We have judged it right that the canons of the Holy Fathers made in every synod even until now, should remain in force.

— Council of Chalcedon, AD 451

Many of the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the church were decided upon at large church meetings called councils. Councils brought together leaders from all over the known world to hammer out issues, such as responses to heretical teachings, that were too difficult for individual pastors or bishops to handle alone. There are seven ecumenical councils that every branch of the church¹⁷ recognizes today, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, and there have been fourteen additional Catholic councils.¹⁸

The first recorded instance of a church council is found in the New Testament. The Jerusalem Council is the name that was given to the meeting of church leaders of Antioch (with Paul and Barnabas) and of Jerusalem in which the large growth in the number of Gentile converts in the early church was discussed (Acts 15:2–29).¹⁹ The issue being addressed was a practical one concerning how Jewish and Gentile Christians would relate to one another on a daily basis. Gentile Christians were to abstain from certain activities that would be barriers for relationships with Jewish Christians, such as eating food offered to idols (see Rom. 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 8:1–13). As a result of that council, it was also agreed that Gentile Christians did not have to become Jewish or observe Jewish practices to worship God, even though God had chosen the Jews as his special people.

Because the council allowed these changes to be put into place in all the represented churches (rather than on a case-by-case basis), it prevented individual leaders from requiring churches they led to conform to their own ideas about the Jewish question.

Like the Jerusalem Council, later church councils were called to address not only a disagreement over a theological issue but also the practical ramifications of that issue. For instance, in the Council of Nicaea, the question being asked was, “How can we worship one God (the Father) and also worship Jesus Christ?” Though this was a practical question about worship, it couldn’t be disconnected from the more abstract theological issue of how Jesus Christ is related to his Father. The council affirmed that both Jesus and the Father are members of a single being, God.

So are the councils’ decisions authoritative? It is instructive to notice that in 1 Corinthians when Paul is asked about whether Christians should eat food offered to idols (in 1 Cor. 8:1–13), he appeals not to the decision of the Jerusalem Council but instead to the revelation he had received from Jesus Christ. This shows that Paul saw the Jerusalem Council as in some sense authoritative but not ultimately so. His appeal was to God’s revelation as the arbiter of truth, not to a human decision at a council.

Uses of Councils

Councils bring together Christians from all over the world — not just the best and brightest thinkers, the flashiest preachers, or the most fervent activists but a cross section of informed Christian leaders. Ideally, the diversity that a council brings — both in the origins of the attendees and in their viewpoints — ensures that all viewpoints are fairly represented. Having asked the Spirit to guide their decisions, these Christians then try to work out a solution to the questions at hand that is best in line with Scripture.

Yet the councils didn’t always follow this ideal. They were sometimes marked by politics and dissension, even the use of force. The

way that key questions about God were decided may make us wonder whether the lines that councils drew between orthodoxy and heresy are worth keeping or whether they are simply part of the struggles of a bygone age. Does it matter whether we believe that God is a trinity or that Jesus is both God and man?

In retrospect, the decisions of the councils seem to have been best. (They say hindsight is 20/20.) Contrary to the everyday perception that the church devised a dogma and then imposed it on the unwilling masses (the “extremists” on the “moderates,” as medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya phrased it), the story of the councils is one in which the complexity and ambiguity of Scripture is defended time after time against oversimplifications that would have lost something crucial to the faith. If the proceedings of the councils were not always the best examples of witness to Christ, they nevertheless held the church together against a wrongful decision. Think of it as comparable to the Union and the Confederates in the American Civil War. That war still scars our national memory, but it was necessary to prevent our country from going in an unfortunate direction. In the same way, there is much to be grateful for in the councils.

Know the Creeds and Councils

This book aims to provide an accessible overview of the main creeds, confessions, catechisms, and councils of Christian history. It is an introduction to some of the most important theological declarations in the Christian tradition. It is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to *all* creeds, councils, and confessions; that would take nothing less than an encyclopedia. However, I hope that after reading this book, you will come away with a deeper and better understanding of how the church has wrestled with major doctrinal questions and has emerged stronger as Jesus continues to build his church.

Know the Creeds and Councils is not an academic book or only for “educated lay readers.” It is designed to be read by individuals or used in a group setting. My hope is that this book will complement

more thorough treatments such as Jaroslav Pelikan's *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, which is a nearly seven-hundred-page book filled with top-notch historical scholarship on the creeds and confessions.

The chapters are brief and to the point. For each creed, confession, catechism, or council, I present its historical background, its content, and its contemporary relevance. Because some readers will prefer to look at just a few specific issues, I have tried to strike a balance between letting each chapter stand alone and building the narrative as things unfolded historically. Discussion questions and recommendations for further reading are included at the end of each chapter.

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APOSTLES' CREED

ca. 140

Historical Background

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest creed of the church, and its influence can be seen in many of the subsequent creeds in church history. The Apostles' Creed¹ was so named because of a tradition that emerged in the sixth century that each of the apostles contributed one of the creed's twelve articles, or statements of belief.² This story, although ancient, is almost certainly a legend: the Apostles' Creed is not a direct production of the apostles themselves. Rather, the justification for continuing to call this formulation the Apostles' Creed is that it preserves the "rule of faith" that was transmitted from the apostles. It should be understood as a summary of apostolic teaching.³

The creed is an early witness to the apostolic teaching, and not an attempt to attribute a later document to the apostolic era. This can be seen from its development from the so-called Old Roman Creed that was used during baptisms, which can be dated from the middle of the second century (about AD 140) in Greek and in Latin around AD 390. The Old Roman Creed featured the main tenets of

the Apostles' Creed, with a few additions that are explained in the next section. The present form of the Apostles' Creed, which is both longer and more recent, was probably not compiled until the middle of the fifth century.⁴

During the Middle Ages, it became commonplace to recite the Apostles' Creed throughout the day in Western monasteries, and this practice was retained in the Book of Common Prayer in the Church of England after the Reformation, where it is still recited during morning and evening prayer. Many churches still recite it during baptisms as a summary of the faith into which Christians are baptized.

Church historian Philip Schaff notes that "as the Lord's Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue [10 Commandments] the Law of laws, so the Apostles' Creed is the Creed of Creeds."⁵ Perhaps more than any other profession of faith, the Apostles' Creed has expressed the essentials of Christianity in a way that Christians of all stripes can rally around. Early theologians, like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, affirmed various parts of the creed. John Calvin devoted an entire chapter to the Apostles' Creed in the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and Karl Barth presented his entire system of doctrine through the framework of the creed in *Dogmatics in Outline*. Today, the Apostles' Creed has been at the heart of much of the movement toward Christian unity of the twentieth century. To give only two examples, in 1920 the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion appealed to it as the basis of unity among all Christian churches, and in 1927 at the World Conference on Faith and Order that met at Lausanne, Western and Eastern Christians recited the Apostles' Creed in unison during the opening session.⁶ The Apostles' Creed has been and continues to be of great importance for Christians worldwide.

Content

The Apostles' Creed is brief enough that its entire content can be reproduced here:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the 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, died, and buried; He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and [sits] 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.

If you could go only by this creed (the earliest collection of “essentials”), what would you say that Christianity is? As we will see in the following chapter, on the Council of Nicaea, several key doctrines are not made explicit here: the relationship of Christ to God, and the identity of the Holy Spirit are the most obvious ones that modern Christians would miss. However, it is encouraging and surprising how many of the doctrines that we hold today appear here. There’s the incarnation (“Christ . . . was conceived by the Holy Ghost”), and the story of the Gospels (“suffered . . . was crucified, died, and buried . . . He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven”). There isn’t yet an explicit doctrine of the Trinity, but the creed wants the reader to know that God is tied to the names of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that Christ is said to still be alive and preparing for his role as cosmic judge. God’s forgiveness of sins and promise of physical resurrection are also present, and it is reasonable to assume that these are connected to the snapshot of the gospel story that accompanies the description of Christ. In short, knowing nothing else about Christianity, you could find out who God is, the story of what happened to Jesus of Nazareth, and what will happen next.

However, the creed also contains phrases such as “descended into hell” and “the holy catholic church” that may make modern Protestants pause. These are also essential elements of the Christian

faith (now just as much as then), but since both of these phrases took on specific meanings during the Middle Ages, it is important to understand how ancient Christians would have seen them.

For those who grew up in a Roman Catholic context, the expression “he descended into hell” may be familiar because it is associated with the doctrine of the “harrowing of hell.” In Catholic theology, the idea is that after Christ’s death on the cross, his spirit descended into sheol (the word in Hebrew for the “underworld,” where the dead reside) in order to preach the gospel to the patriarchs, the Old Testament saints, and potentially to other “virtuous” pagans who lived before the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁷

Much of this discussion is not based on the Bible. The New Testament itself emphasizes the consequences of Christ’s death and resurrection from the dead, in which he triumphs over sin, death, and the devil, rather than what Christ did between death and resurrection.⁸ Initially the language of “descent into hell” was borrowed from the Old Testament; it simply meant that Jesus died or passed to sheol (the pit or grave) just as any other person did.⁹

Dying was the final stage of Christ’s humiliation, a necessary passage before his triumph in the resurrection. Second-century theologian Tertullian wrote that “Christ our God, Who because He was man died according to the same Scriptures, satisfied this law also by undergoing the form of human death in the underworld, and did not ascend aloft to heaven until He had gone down to the regions beneath the earth.”¹⁰ The Latin translations of the creed themselves do not agree on how to phrase this doctrine: some have that he descended *ad inferna* (“into hell”), and others *ad inferos* (“to the dead”). The latter reflects more closely, it seems, the intention of the creed.¹¹ A number of contemporary translations reflect this understanding by changing the language of the creed to “he descended to the dead.”

The second potentially troublesome expression in the creed is “the holy catholic church.” Because only the Roman Catholic Church retains “Catholic” in its name, some Protestants might hesi-

tate to confess that they believe in a catholic church. However, the word “catholic” is actually a way to refer to the whole church of Jesus Christ, deriving from two Greek words, *kata* and *holos*, which together mean “according to the whole.” The term is usually translated in Protestant churches as “universal,” but this does not quite do justice to its richness. “Catholic” means that the church exists in every nation where the gospel has spread. Second-century church father Ignatius of Antioch wrote that “wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church,”¹² and fourth-century father Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that the church is catholic not only “because it is spread throughout the world” but also “because it teaches completely and without defect all the doctrines which ought to come to the knowledge of men.”¹³ Wherever the whole apostolic gospel is visibly maintained, that is where the “catholic church” is.

In general, the creed remains as accessible to believers today as it was two thousand years ago. Despite the updates (see the section on historical background), the Apostles’ Creed is as good a tool as any for finding out what early Christians believed, and to seeing how similar it is to what we believe now.

Relevance

Much of the genius of the Apostles’ Creed is in how it shows the supernatural significance of historical events. In a secular age, God the Father, the ascended Christ, and the Holy Spirit seem much less certain than the things that we can see and experience every day. The message that God has forgiven sin because of Christ’s sacrifice seems distant from the reality of a crucified religious leader. In the early church, it was important to ground religious belief in the historical life and death of Jesus of Nazareth — hence the gospel snapshot in the creed — against the elaborate myths of their rivals, the Gnostics, who were interested in Jesus as a figure for their spiritual allegories. In our day, we have the opposite challenge: how do we keep up our religious beliefs when the mundane

realities of our daily lives make it hard to grasp that God interacts with our world?

The Apostles' Creed answers both challenges. It denies that the Christian story is merely myth, but it also affirms that we have a glimpse into the supernatural world through it. It goes on to show the outworking of the historical Jesus and the supernatural world in our daily lives. The communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins are ways in which we can relate to and experience God, because of Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, in our everyday, mundane lives, proving that the supernatural still breaks through into the world. And it ends by reminding us that, just as Jesus' time on an ordinary earth ended with his ascension into a very unordinary glory, so too will our everyday experience of the Holy Spirit end with our own resurrection and exaltation. C. S. Lewis wrote, "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dulllest most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare . . . it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit — immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."¹⁴

The Apostles' Creed reminds us of this reality, and the reason for our hope, in clear, simple terms.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on the Apostles' Creed, what would you say the early Christians believed? Do you see anything that's missing?
2. As the next chapters will show, the Apostles' Creed was still vague about certain theological issues. Which areas do you think might be problematic?
3. How could you, your family, or your church group use the Apostles' Creed as a devotional tool?

Further Reading

- Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1959.
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