

The Ancient Creeds

The Common Faith of the Whole Church

Adapted from Archibald Alexander Hodge,
*The Westminster Confession of Faith:
A Commentary*, 1869.

THE church has advanced very gradually in the accurate interpretation of Scripture and definition of the great doctrines which compose the system of truth it reveals. The attention of the church has been specially directed to the study of one doctrine in one age, and of another doctrine in another age. And as she has thus gradually advanced in the clear discrimination of gospel truth, she has at different periods set down an accurate statement of the results of her new attainments in a creed or confession of faith. In the meantime, heretics spring up on all occasions, who pervert the Scriptures, who exaggerate certain aspects of the truth and deny others equally essential. The church is forced, therefore, to form such accurate definitions of every particular doctrine misrepresented as shall include the whole truth and exclude all error. At the same time, provision must be made for ecclesiastical discipline, and to secure the real cooperation of those who profess to work together in the same cause. Formularies¹ must also be prepared, representing as far as possible the common consent, and clothed with public authority, for the instruction of the members of the church, and especially of the children.

Creeds and confessions, when not abused, have been useful for the following purposes: (1.) To mark, disseminate, and preserve the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the church in any crisis of its development. (2.) To discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and to present it in its integrity and due proportions. (3.) To act as the basis of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony. (4.) To be used as instruments in the great work of popular instruction...It must be remembered, however, that the matter of these creeds binds the consciences of men only so far as it is purely scriptural, and because it is so; and as to the

¹ **formularies** – collections of approved “forms,” statements of religious belief, such as creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

form in which that matter is stated, they bind those only who have voluntarily subscribed the confession, and because of that subscription.

The Apostles' Creed

This was not written by the apostles, but was gradually formed, by common consent, out of the confessions adopted severally by particular churches, and used in the reception of its members. It reached its present form, and universal use among all the churches, about the close of the second century. This creed was appended to the Shorter Catechism, in the first edition published by order of Parliament, “not as though it were composed by the apostles, or ought to be esteemed canonical Scripture...but because it is a brief sum of Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ.”

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
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, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell (Hades);
the third day he rose again from the dead,
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at 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 church²;
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

² **catholic church** – universal church, consisting of all true believers; not the Roman Catholic Church.

The Nicene Creed

This Creed is formed on the basis of the Apostles' Creed, the clauses relating to the consubstantial divinity of Christ being contributed by the great Council held in Nice in Bithynia, A.D. 325, and those relating to the divinity and personality of the Holy Ghost added by the Second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople, A.D. 381; and the phrase "and the son" (commonly called "filioque") added by the Council of the Western Church, held at Toledo, Spain, A.D. 569.

*I believe in one God,
Maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible;*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds;
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man,
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.
He suffered and was buried;
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.
And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.*

*And I believe in the Holy Ghost,
the Lord the Giver of life,
who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
who spake by the prophets.*

*And I believe in one catholic and apostolic church;
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;*

and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The Athanasian Creed

As subsequently heretical opinions sprang up in its bosom with respect to the constitution of the person of Christ, the church was forced to provide additional definitions of the truth. One heretical tendency culminated in Nestorianism, which maintains that the divine and human natures in Christ constitute two persons. This was condemned by the Creed of the Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431. The opposite heretical tendency culminated in Eutychianism, which maintains that the divine and human natures are so united in Christ as to form but one nature. This was condemned by the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451. The Athanasian Creed was evidently composed long after the death of the great theologian whose name it bears, and after the controversies closed and the definitions established by the above-mentioned Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. It is a grand and unique monument of the unchangeable faith of the whole church as to the great mysteries of godliness, the Trinity of Persons in the one God and the duality of natures in the one Christ. It is too long to quote here in full. What relates to the Person of the God-man is as follows:

- 27. But it is necessary to eternal salvation that he should also faithfully believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- 28. It is therefore true faith that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is both God and man.*
- 29. He is God; generated from eternity from the substance of the Father; man born in time from the substance of his Mother.*
- 30. Perfect God, perfect man, subsisting of a rational soul and human flesh.*
- 31. Equal to the Father in respect to his divinity, less than the Father in respect to his humanity.*
- 32. Who, although he is God and man, is not two, but one Christ.*
- 33. But two not from the conversion of divinity into flesh, but from the assumption of his humanity into God.*
- 34. One not at all from confusion of substance, but from unity of Person.*
- 35. For as rational soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ.*

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