

KEEPING THE FAITH

Making Sense of the Christian Creeds

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The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
*Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born from the Virgin Mary
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and buried,
descended to hell,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty,
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead;*

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
*the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh,
and eternal life. Amen.*

How the Creeds arose

The first creeds developed from the confessions of the Trinity which new believers made at baptism, in obedience to Matthew 28.19. They grew larger as they began to summarise the teaching candidates received from their local bishop, and were eventually standardised in the **Apostles' Creed**. The **Nicene Creed** was settled at a Council of 150 bishops in 381AD, in Constantinople, to counter dangerous heresies which had arisen about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. So the Creeds did not *add to* Scriptural teaching, but *summarised* it for the whole Church.

The Nicene 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 Being with the Father.*

Through him all things were made.

*For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit*

he became incarnate of 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 and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

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.*

1 God the Father

*I believe in God the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

(Apostles' Creed)

*We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

(Nicene Creed)

Christians worship the Almighty and Eternal Creator God revealed to Israel in the Old Testament. He has no partner in his transcendent might, unlike the heathen deities, who competed with each other for power and were themselves subject to the Universe's laws. But our God is not part of the creation; he formed it all from nothing by his creative Word. It is completely under his authority, not only the whole physical Universe, but all spiritual powers as well. Nothing else is worthy of worship apart from him.

Every created being is subject to his will. Even though he has given angels and humans freedom of their will, this freedom is never in independence from him, since he is still our Creator.

And yet he is called "Father", and for three reasons.

- Firstly, he is Father in creation, creating not by accident or whim, but as a personal act of love, and he continues to care for his work and nurture it as long as it exists.
- Secondly he is Father in relationship to his Son Jesus, and has an eternal, loving relationship with him which sets a divine pattern for every relationship.
- Thirdly, he is the Father of all Christians, for we are adopted as his own children through Jesus Christ. He is not just *the* Father, but *our* Father.

2 God the Son

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

(Apostles' Creed)

*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 Being with the Father.*

Through him all things were made.

(Nicene Creed)

The Creeds distinguish Jesus from the Father, but they are careful not to divide them. For as Son of God, Jesus is of one "Being" with the Father. Although his existence comes from the Father, he is "eternally begotten" — there was never a time when he did not exist. So he is God come from God (John 1.1). As the Father is Uncreated Light, so is the Son (Hebrews 1.3). His deity is not some inferior, derived thing, but he is "true God of true God" (1 John 5.20); he is God as the Father is God. He is not created, but begotten, and so has the nature of God as a child bears its father's human nature.

But the divine nature is different from ours, for it cannot be divided up. Jesus is far closer to his Father than we are to ours; he is of one "Being" with him. That is why Christians believe strongly in only one God, whilst speaking of Father, Son and Holy Spirit separately.

The Creeds emphasise this unity with the Father by calling Jesus "one Lord". God was known as "Lord" in the Old Testament. by New Testament times his Covenant name, *Yahweh*, was considered too holy to use, and was replaced by "Lord". So for the disciples to call Jesus "Lord" was as much as to call him God. More than this, Jesus is our only Lord because only through knowing him as Lord can we come to know the Father as Lord.

The Nicene Creed's final affirmation of Christ's deity is to emphasise his role with the Father as Creator (John 1.3, Colossians 1.16).

But Jesus Christ is not only fully God – he is fully man as well. The Creeds summarise this simply by the use of his name. For “Jesus” (*Yeshua*) is a human name, shared by many in his own time and during the history of Israel. Though its meaning, “Yahweh saves”, reflects his mission, he saves us not through divine might, but as a man, as his namesake Joshua did when Israel first entered the land of Canaan.

“Christ” too is a human title. It means “anointed”, as kings and priests were anointed. But in particular it names Jesus as the anointed Messiah (Hebrew for Christ) promised through the prophets, the descendant of King David who would unite royalty and priesthood in one person. In this human sense, too, Jesus is our Lord.

*Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born from the Virgin Mary,
(Apostles' Creed)*

*For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*

(Nicene Creed)

The mystery of how Jesus can be both God and Man is explored further here, and we see that he is not to be seen as a strange hybrid of the divine and human, but as One with a particular purpose in his incarnation — “for us men and for our salvation”. There is a real sense of a divine rescue mission as well as a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Jesus voluntarily comes from heaven to save us. And he does so by becoming like us, by taking into himself a truly human nature from the Virgin Mary.

The incarnation means that Jesus became like us in every aspect of human life, from birth to death. He is truly our brother. And yet the virgin birth reminds us that though his deity may have been concealed on earth, yet he did not lose it. He remained the eternal Word of God even as he was made human, and dwelt amongst us.

At the time the Creeds were written, Mary was called “Theotokos”, the mother of God. This, however, was not in order to exalt her beyond what Scripture makes her, a “highly favoured” woman (Luke 1.29). Instead, it was to emphasise the unity of Jesus. He was not a mixture of God and man, and nor was he two separate people, one human and one divine. Instead he was true God and true man in one Person. So although Mary only contributed the human nature, by the power of the Holy Spirit she gave birth to the God—Man.

*Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and buried,
descended to hell,*

(Apostles’ Creed)

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

(Nicene Creed)

The death of Jesus is not just a moral lesson, teaching the virtue of giving life for others. Neither is it a myth like some pagan stories of the death of a god, symbolising the cycles of nature. The mention of Pontius Pilate, a real historical person ruling an actual province of a famous empire, places Jesus into a historical setting. It is not death which saves it is *this* death, the death of a particular, unique man.

The mention of crucifixion shows not only this specific death, but a shameful and judicial death. He was punished in death, but not for his own wrongs. It was, as Scripture says, a sacrifice of atonement for our sins (Romans 3.25).

Some have said that Jesus did not die. He only seemed to, or he revived, or another died in his place. But the Creeds emphasise that he was judicially executed, that he did die, and that he was buried.

The phrase “descended into hell” has various interpretations, but the most Scriptural is that it emphasises the reality of his death, and in particular that he shared the same experience of death as we do, just as he shared our life. “Hell” here translates “Hades”, or Hebrew “Sheol”, the state of the dead, or the grave.

*On the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty,
(Apostles' Creed)
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.
(Nicene Creed)*

The resurrection shows God's vindication of the whole ministry of Jesus, and of his sinless death. By overcoming death it proves that sin really has been vanquished by the cross, so that we can know we are forgiven on the basis of an accomplished event. And so it is also the guarantee of our own resurrection. But it is more, for in conquering death Christ has not only won our personal salvation; he has ushered in the dawn of the new spiritual creation, of which he is the firstborn. So the age to come is also guaranteed by what Jesus has achieved.

"On the third day" disposes of the theories which teach merely the continuance of Jesus' spirit, or of his ideas, among the disciples. It places the resurrection in space and time; on Saturday he was not alive (he obeyed the Jewish law by resting from his work on the Sabbath!), but on Sunday he arose, and was subsequently seen by over 500 witnesses (1 Corinthians 15.4—8).

The ascension of Jesus to heaven demonstrates the final achievement of salvation. A human being has now gained access to God in heaven, and proves to us that if we are in Christ we shall not only be raised from death, but will be with him in the presence of God for ever. It told the disciples no longer to look for Jesus in the flesh, but to build the Church on the ministry of the Spirit which he would send.

For Jesus to sit down at God's right hand means both that his work is done, and also that he has won the right to reign from heaven on God's behalf. It establishes him as Lord of all not in the future, but now. So we owe him total obedience and commitment. But equally we know that our victory and reward is guaranteed _ there is no enemy in this life or the next which Jesus has not already overcome for us.

*From there he will come to judge the living and the dead;
(Apostles' Creed)
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

(Nicene Creed)

In the Old Testament, the victorious coming of Christ seemed to be a single event. But Jesus taught that, though victory was definitively won at his first coming, God will give time for many to repent and be saved before he comes again in glory. He comes firstly to judge, to redress every wrong that has been done since the earth began. But that judgement includes the salvation of all those he accounts innocent (that is, all those who share in the righteousness that comes through Christ).

He also comes to reign, to establish the unopposed rule of God over all creation, and to remove everything which does not submit to that rule. That reign begins with a cosmic act of new creation — the new heavens and the new earth — which unlike this world will never perish. In this way his kingdom will have no end. And if we are in Christ, we are heirs to that kingdom!

3 God the Holy Spirit

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

(Apostles' Creed)

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.*

(Nicene Creed)

The whole of the rest of the Creeds has to do with the Holy Spirit, because it is he who brings to us, and to the Church, all the blessings promised to us in Christ. He is, as it were, God's active and invisible agent in all his work.

But he is not a mere force, and he is not created, like the angels. He is Holy because he is personal. And the Nicene Creed calls him "Lord", as Jesus is Lord, because like Jesus he is God. And yet there is only one God, and only one Lord. So once again, we see that the Creeds distinguish Father, Son and Spirit without dividing them. Unlike the Son, he is not begotten, but is said to *proceed* from the Father (John 15.22), and from the Son (because he is also called "The Spirit of Christ," Romans 8.9, 1 Peter 1.11). And because he is God, he is worshipped and glorified just as are the Father and Son. The Creed summarises his ministry as "the giver of life" and the One who "has spoken through the prophets." He is the *Lifegiver* firstly because of his work in creation (Genesis 1.2), secondly because as God's "breath" he bestows human life (Genesis 2.7), and lastly because he gives us eternal life through the gospel. The fact that he has spoken through the Prophets shows him as the *Revealer* of God's salvation. He was active long before Pentecost, revealing God's promises to the Old Testament writers, and afterwards, similarly inspiring the New Testament. In other words, when the Bible speaks, God the Holy Spirit speaks. He also reveals the truths of Scripture to each individual believer, speaking prophetically through preachers whenever the gospel is proclaimed, and revealing its truth directly, and effectually, to our hearts so that we believe and are saved.

*The holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
(Apostles' Creed)
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
(Nicene Creed)*

We do not believe in the Church as we do in the Persons of the Trinity, but as a work of the Holy Spirit. For the Church is not simply a group of people with similar views, still less a building, but the Body of Christ, brought together by the Spirit, in response to God's Word, to live to Christ. That is why, despite the various denominations, there is only one church, and why it is catholic (which means universal). What marks a true church is that it is apostolic, *ie* that is based on the doctrine of the apostles in Scripture, and the sacraments given to them by Christ.

This leads to the concept of the "communion of saints". Through one

apostolic faith, we come into Christ's body, and so are in spiritual union with all the elect throughout the world, from distant past to distant future, and even with the elect angels in heaven. We are not alone in our struggles, and will rejoice with a glorious company hereafter!

The remission of sins,

(Apostles' Creed)

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

(Nicene Creed)

It is through Christ's Church that we hear the saving gospel of Christ, which has as its heart the forgiveness of sins. It is the Spirit who gives us repentance and faith to believe the gospel, and baptises us into the death and resurrection of Christ, a spiritual truth signified and realised in water baptism (Romans 6.3—4, 1 Peter 3.21). It is because of the divine origin of this forgiveness that we can be certain of it, without any hint of arrogance.

*The resurrection of the flesh,
and eternal life. Amen.*

(Apostles' Creed)

*We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.*

(Nicene Creed)

The Christian hope, which has all the certainty of God's promises, is that when Christ comes again the Spirit will raise our bodies from death just as he raised Jesus. This is not just something we accept, but that "we look for", because such a living hope puts a proper perspective on all that happens to us here (1 Peter 1.3—7). Note this is not just a survival of the spirit: God, who created our bodies good, has determined to save us entirely, body and spirit. It is a wholly new, and even better creation than the one we know, which will need a whole new world to express itself fully.

And in a sense, this new life has already begun. It is eternal life, but this does not just mean it lasts forever. It means it is God's life, brimming over with joy, peace and righteousness. Being eternal, it cannot be lost, and it cannot ever lose its pleasure and blessing. And those who are in Christ already have it, because their old selves have

died with him on the cross, and the new life they have even now received through him is just that eternal life (1 John 5.12).

The real challenge of the Creeds is to use them as a means for God to increase our faith, so that we live more and more as those who already possess eternal life, counting ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6.11), and holding unswervingly to the hope we profess (Hebrews 10.23), knowing that it is promised by the faithful One — God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen