



CREEDS,
CONFESSIONS,
& CATECHISMS

A Reader's Edition

Edited by
CHAD VAN DIXHOORN

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AND CATECHISMS

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INTRODUCTION

Brief statements of key doctrines have been with us since the beginning of biblical history. They often focus on God and the way of salvation. Old Testament readers encounter in the capstone of the books of Moses, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). New Testament readers overhear Paul summarizing to the Corinthians his own teaching: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor. 15:3–5).

The desire to state truth openly is a basic Christian instinct. Cults hide things. Christ’s disciples share what they have learned. Unsurprisingly, historians have found dozens of summaries of scriptural teaching from the centuries following the ascension of Christ and the deaths of his apostles. It was not unusual for such statements to begin with the Latin word *credo*, meaning, “I believe.” These early creeds, like those in the Scriptures, often focused on what the church understood to be true about God; on what is and is not true about the person of Christ; or on what we must believe about the work of Christ as Savior.

As it happens, later creeds tended to be longer than earlier ones. By the time of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, so much had been learned—and so many doctrines were being disputed between the Reformers and Rome—that creeds were supplemented by longer lists of doctrines that Christians confessed. Creeds were still in use,

most often in worship, but now confessions were written to explain what Lutheran and Reformed Christians believed. These documents carefully explained what doctrines were held in common with the old faith of Rome while also stating clearly where the Reformers were forced to disagree with Rome in their recovery of the teachings of the early church and, most basically, of the Bible. They also explained where the Reformers disagreed with one another.

Naturally, because confessions say more, more confessions were needed. Here we find a contrast with creeds. Creeds have a wide circulation among Christian churches. One creed can serve Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Lutherans alike. But these communions needed something more precise than a creed if they were to possess working documents that united like-minded missionaries and church members, if they were to train teachers of the word successfully, or if they wished to advance clear communication between preachers and parishioners, with the one seeking a place to serve and the other seeking a pastor.

While not typically used in worship, these confessions were useful for worship. Careful distinctions provided richer material for praise than did broad generalizations. Saying more about the character of God and the grace of the gospel encouraged more confidence in prayer. Confessions also paid careful attention to precise terminology, a kind of labeling that promoted learning. Such a technique has proved useful in studies of the natural world and of language; it is useful in the study of the Bible, too.

Concerning justification, for example, the Scriptures speak of a righteousness of Christ credited to those who do not deserve it. They also speak of a free gift of forgiveness purchased by Christ for sinners. Sometimes the Bible tethers this righteousness to justification. And sometimes it ties forgiveness to justification. The authors of Reformation confessions noted these associations of words and ideas. They did

not see tension or confusion. On the contrary, they concluded that *justification* must be the Bible's umbrella term for a credited righteousness, on the one hand, and divine forgiveness, on the other—two distinct but united aspects of the one doctrine of justification.

In light of such detail, discovered after careful study of the Scriptures, it is hardly possible for an attentive Christian to be content with only and always speaking of “salvation” in general. Once alert to fuller teaching, Christians ought to explain and then celebrate justification. And then one discovers adoption, then the blessing of sanctification, then perseverance, and so on. The Reformation-era confessions identify, explain, and celebrate these gifts with gratitude: through such statements we confess our faith to God and before the world.

Creeds, confessions, and catechisms most obviously serve a doctrinal purpose. Nonetheless, if they have sufficient gravitas, they enjoy an ecumenical purpose as well. These historic statements remind us that the content of the Christian faith does not continually change; they bring Christians of the present into conversation with Christians of the past. Classic creeds, confessions, and catechisms also remind us that we do not read the Bible only as individuals; we read it as one body, experiencing significant unity as we do so. These are things that a list of bullet points on a church website cannot do. Such lists may have the *form* of a creed, but they will never have the full *function* of a creed.

Four of the better-known creeds of the early church, two of which were written by ecumenical councils, are printed here for the use of individuals and churches. The confessions and catechisms that follow are particularly significant texts in Protestant history. These are defining documents for Lutherans, Anglicans, the Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Sometimes with slight adjustments, they have been used by many millions of Christians.

These creeds, confessions, and catechisms do not possess equal standing with Scripture—nothing could rise to the level of this library of sixty-six books from God. Creeds, confessions, and catechisms are useful only to the extent that they reproduce faithfully the teaching of Scripture itself. But they serve Christians well in their attempt to understand one another better; they help us to listen quietly when we too often talk noisily.

This book also may be a helpful teaching tool for churches, perhaps offering paragraphs that can be incorporated into worship in order to help God's people state what they believe, confess their sin, and profess faith in Christ, all by the power of his Spirit. And it may enable readers to benefit from a paragraph or a set of questions and answers that summarizes Christian truth in profoundly helpful ways.

Chad Van Dixhoorn
Editor

The Apostles' Creed

INTRODUCTION

The Apostles' Creed is both the best known and the least known of all postbiblical creeds. Its doctrine is apostolic, as it proclaims the high points of New Testament teaching. Elements of the Apostles' Creed are found in summaries of the faith by early Christian writers, with some lines matching word for word. Christians employ this creed in worship more than any other creed. Nonetheless, its origins are shrouded in mystery. We do not know who wrote this first-person statement of faith, even if we are sure that it was not written by any of the apostles themselves.

In this summary of the faith we find a basic call to believe in a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the three headings organizing the creed. Here we confess a God who is both Father and Creator; a Savior who is God's Son and Mary's son; and a redeeming work that begins with humiliation and ends with exaltation. Here too we see a compressed account of the Holy Spirit's work in gathering the church—bringing Christians into communion with God and each other.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the creed is its balanced picture of Christ. This creed reminds us that the Lord who came first to rescue us will come a second time to judge us. This is what the church confesses in the Apostles' Creed: that we are saved by Jesus, from Jesus. It is on this basis alone that believers are now forgiven, will one day be raised, and will forever live with Christ.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary;
suffered under Pontius Pilate;
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy catholic¹ church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.

¹ "Catholic" means universal; that is, there is one church across all times, places, and peoples.

The Nicene Creed

INTRODUCTION

The text customarily called the Nicene Creed has a three-part history in the Western church. The creed was issued as a brief statement at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), while the First Council of Constantinople (381) later provided a substantial addition concerning the Holy Spirit. Thus historians term this creed the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Even later, a line in the creed was changed (in the Western church only) to capture the significant teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but from the Son as well. It is this fuller document in its Western form that is provided here.

The Nicene Creed contains many of the lines found in the Apostles' Creed, but it was written chiefly in response to minimizations and even denials of the divinity of Christ. Thus the creed asserts that Jesus is of the same (not similar) essence or substance as the Father. It states that he is begotten and not "made," unlike every other thing visible or invisible. Even the rhythmic phrases often translated "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God" are connective, equalizing phrases. They underline three times that the Son is "of" (in the sense of "from") the Father. These lines, taken with those about the Holy Spirit, are best read as reflections on the equality and closeness of the Three who are One. Together these lines form the most closely held and widely confessed statement about our triune God in the Christian church.

THE NICENE 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 only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of the 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 Spirit 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 sits on 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 I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life;
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;

who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and
glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.
And I believe in one holy catholic¹ 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. Amen.

¹ “Catholic” means universal; that is, there is one church across all times, places, and peoples.

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