

The Apostles' Creed

The Formulation of the Apostles' Creed

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The Formulation of the Apostles' Creed

John K. Pfeiffer

The Apostles' Creed is very familiar and beloved among most who call themselves Christians. This has been true for the last fifteen hundred years. In liturgical churches, children learn it at a young age simply by hearing their elders confess their faith Sunday after Sunday. It is heartwarming to hear a young boy begin to utter the words that express his simple faith . . . to hear a young girl begin to join with the Christian Church on earth, past and present, in confessing the common conviction that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is her Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Confessionalism

However, the need for a child to have a simple confession was not what gave birth to this precious confession. It was born of a need for the Church to combat the inroads of error. It has been so throughout history. Faithful disciples of Christ have repeatedly found it necessary to raise up a standard to which all who want to remain steadfast in the Word of our Lord and who want to make this publicly known can rally.

It is generally true that written creeds and confessions within the Christian Church are reactionary. When churches are teaching only the truth, there is no need for official creeds and confessions. The declarations of Holy Scripture, when unopposed, can stand as written without the need for systematization. It is when error rears its ugly head that it becomes necessary to “draw a line in the sand,” to make a “here I stand” declaration. Confessional statements then become a measuring rod—symbol—calibrated by the Word of God and used to demonstrate if a given teaching “measures up” to the standard of Scripture. “A symbol, therefore, is a creed, or an authoritative formulation of faith or doctrine distinguishing Christians from non-Christians, or orthodoxy from heterodoxy, or denomination from denomination.”¹

¹ Klotzsche, E. H., Christian Symbolics, publ., The Lutheran Literary Board, p. 13

Confessional statements are not drawn up to supplement Scripture, they simply organize what the whole of the Bible teaches on a given subject and present that doctrine in a systematic fashion. Thus, a confessional statement does not have an equal standing with the Bible, it is only a documented manifestation of what the confessor believes is in the Bible. It does not establish his faith, it reveals it. In a sense, a confession does not tell us what to believe, it shows others what we do believe. It does not precede faith, it proceeds from faith. *“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”* (Matthew 12:34). *“For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation”* (Romans 10:10). The Spirit, working through the means of grace, fills the heart. After that, the faith-filled heart makes confession.

Creeds vs. Confessions

Perhaps, a distinction should be made between creeds and confessions. A creed, by its very name—*credo*, “I believe”—is a statement of what the confessor holds in his heart as the way of salvation. It is the most basic and foundational statement of faith. Its purpose is to distinguish a believer from an unbeliever. It serves as a line of demarcation—those who stand on one side are believers, those who stand on the other are unbelievers.

A confession, on the other hand, is meant to distinguish the orthodox from the heterodox. Think of the *visible* church as a sphere. Creeds are found on the outer rim of that sphere, distinguishing those on the inside from those on the outside. Confessions are found within the sphere, distinguishing one *professing* Christian from another. It is not the purpose of the confession to discover who is or is not a believer, but rather to discover who is or is not advocating the truth. On the one side of the line are those who hold to the truth and with whom we practice fellowship, on the other side are those who teach error and with whom we do not practice fellowship.

Both creed and confession serve as rallying points. They are banners held high, inviting the followers of Jesus to come and stand with the faithful. They are a finger pointing out both the truth to be embraced

and the error to be avoided. They are a beacon, powered by the Word of God, lighting the way of truth and righteousness.

The Background of the Apostles' Creed

Gnosticism (1st and 2nd Centuries)

Such a line was drawn, such a banner was raised, such a beacon was ignited when the Apostles' Creed was written. Its formulation was a reaction to anti-Christian teachings that were flooding the churches of that time. In the early history of the Church, the attacks instigated by Satan were not very subtle. Many attacks were against the person of Christ: His divine and human natures. Other attacks were leveled against the work of Christ, for example, the vicarious atonement and justification.

The most notorious of the early errors was Gnosticism. The spiritually noxious fumes of this error were seeping through the nations. Coming from the East, possibly Persia or India, it was rooted in mysticism. Mysticism is the belief that by inner contemplation one can achieve a unity with the divine and discover truths that transcend normal, human knowledge (e.g., transcendental meditation, Buddhism). This is the *gnosis* (γνῶσις—knowledge) that gave rise to the name of the error.

Mysticism was and is so vague that it is hard to codify. For this reason, it was easily incorporated into any number of more defined religions. Since all religions outside of Christianity are of human origin, the idea that one can discover truths by inner contemplation is appealing to natural man. The Gnostic practitioners would simply incorporate various aspects of a given religion into their religion, producing a religious mishmash that retained the basic tenets of Gnosticism, while having an appeal to the practitioners of the targeted religion.

As the poisonous fumes of Gnosticism spread into Christian communities, eastern philosophies began to attach themselves to Christian doctrine, forming a new and deadly form of Christianity

which was not Christianity at all. As Paul writes regarding Judaizing: *“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ”* (Galatians: 1:6f). Many weak Christians or novices were trapped by this thinking. They had learned that, unlike their former idolatry, Christianity is not a mere external exercise, but an internal, spiritual religion. Gnosticism drew on this belief, but twisted it.

One significant distinction between Christianity and Gnosticism relates to the origin of knowledge and truth. True Christianity teaches that saving knowledge enters the heart from the outside as the Holy Spirit works through the Bible. Gnosticism proposed that by inner contemplation a man can search his own natural being and discover God and knowledge. Thus, truth finds its origin in man, rather than in God and His Word. Once such a belief is established, a man can conjure up whatever “truth” fits his fancy.

Among the errors of Gnosticism produced by this kind of thinking were the following:

- One supreme god, many lesser deities (e.g., Jehovah the Creator, Christ, etc.
- Dualism: spirit is good; matter is evil. Therefore:
 - Christ did not have real flesh and blood (not truly human) (cf. Docetism).
 - Christ did not offer Himself as a real sacrifice for sin. He neither died nor rose again.
 - Salvation is not achieved through the vicarious atonement, but through “higher” knowledge achieved by inner contemplation.
 - Salvation is the freeing of the spirit from all matter, especially the flesh.

Note: Modern higher critics of the Bible are gnostics in disguise.

The apostles Paul and John addressed the matter of Gnosticism in their epistles. It would appear that the Gospel of John, at least in part, may have been written to refute gnostic errors and establish the truth that God has come in the flesh.

Examples:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge (γνῶσις—knowledge) (1 Timothy 6:20).

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world (1 John 4:1-3).

Docetism

In the second century, there arose an offshoot of Gnosticism, known as Docetism (from δοκέω—to seem, to appear). The chief error of this aberration was the teaching that Christ merely *seemed* to be human and only *appeared* to be born, to live, to suffer, to die. Of course, this would mean that the sacrifice of Christ was a sham and had no vicarious significance. By extension, the Lord's Supper would be regarded as nothing but bread and wine. Ignatius, in his letter to the church in Smyrna, writes:

They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.²

² Jurgens, W.A., "The Faith of the Early Fathers: Pre-Nicene and Nicene Eras, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1970, p. 25).

Montanism (2nd and 3rd Centuries)

In the late second century, a priest of Cybele named Montanus of Phrygia “converted” to Christianity and then began to modify it. For many, Montanism was a reaction to the libertine attitudes that were developing within some churches (e.g., Pergamos and Thyatira, Revelation 2). The apostle Paul wrote about this attitude in the sixth chapter of Romans, *“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?”* (Romans 6:1).

The concern of the Montanists was justified, but their reaction was excessive. While the libertines had ridden the pendulum to the extreme left, the Montanists jumped on and rode it to the extreme right. They adopted rigoristic and ascetic forms of puritanism, denying to themselves many of the things of this world and insisting that all Christians do the same. Perhaps they are among the errorists whom the Spirit had in mind when He inspired the words of 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.”

As often happens with religions that split from Christianity, the belief in continuing revelation was adopted by Montanus. This was necessary in order for him to propose new teachings. As one examines the religions that claim continuing revelation, we can see that the purpose is to provide some legitimacy to their new doctrines.

Such a departure from the *sola scriptura* principle requires another error. If one cannot have confidence solely in the objective words of the Bible, he has to look outside of the Bible for assurance of salvation. This gave rise to the promotion of charismatic principles, particularly speaking in tongues.

Also found within Montanism was the belief in the early return of Christ to inaugurate a millennialistic reign on earth. The adoption of such a belief may have been based on the hope that there would be a time of purity during which the Montanists would rule.

Monarchianism (3rd Century)

The term *Monarchianism* is derived from the word *monarch* meaning “rule by one.” Monarchianism was a Unitarian belief that there is only one person in the Godhead. There were two views of this belief: *Dynamistic Monarchianism* and *Modalistic Monarchianism*.

Dynamistic Monarchianism held the belief that the Father is the only person of the Godhead. They taught that although Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, He was not God, but rather a sinless man imbued with a δύναμις (“power”), that is “divine power.” Due to the view that Jesus was then adopted by the Father, this error is also called *Adoptionism*.

This version of Monarchianism is believed to have been originated by Theodotus of Byzantium (ca. 200) and later espoused by Paul of Samosata (ca. 260), bishop of Antioch in Syria. The latter’s name has been associated with this error: Samosatianism.

Modalistic Monarchianism taught that Father, Son, and Spirit are merely three modes or ways in which God makes Himself known to men. Thus, God acted as the Father in the work of creation, He acted as the Son in the work of redemption, and He acted as the Spirit in the work of sanctification. According to the modalists, the Father displayed Himself as the Son by being born of Mary. Their view of God is like that of the sun: at one time we see the sun as round, at another as bright, and at another as hot.

One of my sons once had a “Masters of the Universe” action figure called “Man-E-Faces.” Man-E-Faces had three different faces, each of which he used according to the need of the moment. The action figure had a full-head helmet with an opening at the front. Inside the helmet was a head with three faces. As one turned the knob that controlled the head, one face at a time appeared in the helmet opening. Behold, Modalistic Monarchianism.

This error “. . . was taught by Praxeas, a priest from Asia Minor, in Rome about 206 and was opposed by Tertullian in the tract *Adversus Praxean* (c. 213), an important contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity.”³ This version of Monarchianism has been called, *Patripassianism*, signifying that the Father is the one who suffered, not the Son. It has also been dubbed, *Sabellianism*, after the assumed founder of this belief, Sabellius (Rome and Lybia). Heirs of this heresy were Michael Servetus (Spain at the time of the Reformation) and Emanuel Swedenborg (ca. 1750).

Throughout the centuries, there have been many variations of Monarchianism. The modern heirs of this religion are the Unitarian-Universalist Church, the United Pentecostal Church, and some branches of Congregationalism. One might include the Mormons as Adoptionists.

Donatism (4th Century)

The final error addressed in the Apostles’ Creed is Donatism, named after its author, Donatus. The bishop of Carthage, Donatus, developed his own version of Christianity, making it a religion of perfectionism. Anyone who failed to measure up to the standard set by Donatus would be excluded from the church. In keeping with perfectionism, he taught that the validity of the sacraments depended on the upright character of the officiant.

Again the pendulum swings. As with Montanism, this appears to have been a reactionary religion. To the far left swing those who, when threatened with persecution or even death, denied Christ in various degrees. These were given the label *Lapsi* (Latin: *lapsus*—a falling) because they lapsed from the faith. To the far right were the Donatists, who denied forgiveness to repentant *Lapsi*. They took this legalistic approach also toward those who had committed what they defined as a “deadly sin.”

³ Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/Monarchianism.

The Donatists regarded persecution as a mark of salvation. Indeed, some of them *sought* to be persecuted and martyred. This fits their attitude toward the Lapsi, for if persecution is a mark of salvation, then evading persecution would be a mark that one is not among the saved.

Apostles' Creed vs. Error

<u>Article of Truth</u>	<u>Error Refuted</u>
<i>Maker of heaven and earth</i>	Gnosticism
<i>His only Son</i>	Monarchianism
<i>Conceived by the Holy Ghost</i>	Modalistic Monarchianism
<i>Born of (ἐκ) the Virgin Mary, suffered, ascended</i>	Docetism / Gnosticism (Son born)
<i>Sitteth at the right hand of God</i>	Gnosticism
<i>Come again to judge the living and the dead</i>	Montanism
<i>Holy Ghost</i>	Gnosticism
<i>Forgiveness of sins</i>	Gnosticism / Donatism
<i>Resurrection of the body</i> —The early church used the word “flesh” instead of “body” because of Gnosticism.	Gnosticism

The Formation of the Apostles' Creed

The form of the Apostles' Creed which we use today was finalized around A.D. 750. While the name implies that it can be traced back to Christ's apostles, the apostles did not formulate this creed. There is no mention nor even a hint of its existence anywhere in the New Testament nor in the writings of the early church fathers. We retain the name because the creed expresses the teachings of the apostles. This does not mean that there were no credal statements antedating the finalized form of the Apostles' Creed.

Precursors from Scripture

The following passages are considered by some to have been used as formal declarations of faith. However, this author could find no evidence that these were ever adopted and repeated as confessions. Nevertheless, it seems logical that some might have been used, especially in the midst of a controversy.

Hear O Israel, Jehovah is our God, Jehovah is one
(Deuteronomy 6:4).⁴

Jehovah, He is God; Jehovah, He is God (1 Kings 18:39).⁴

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel! (John 1:49).

You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (John 6:68f).

My Lord and my God! (John 20:28).

⁴ Translation by the author.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:36f).

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household (Acts 16:31).

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and . . . He was buried, and . . . He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11 NASB).

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory. (1 Timothy 3:16).

Precursors from the Church Fathers

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110 AD): “Be deaf, therefore, when any man speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, who was the Son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of heaven and on earth and below

the earth; who also was truly raised from the dead, His Father having raised Him, who will raise us also in like manner who believe on Him.”⁵

Irenaeus (ca.180 AD): Irenaeus confessed his faith “in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race.”⁶

Tertullian (ca.200): “The Rule of Faith is altogether one, sole, immovable, and irreformable, namely to believe in one God Almighty, the maker of the world; and His Son, Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, on the third day raised again from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, coming to judge the living and the dead, also through the resurrection of the flesh.”⁷

Cyprian (250) produced a formula which reads: “*Credo in Deum Patrem, in Christum Filium, in Spiritum Sanctum et Sanctam Ecclesiam, remissionem peccatorum, vitam aeternam.*”

The heretic Novatian (260) produced the following: “*Credo in Deum Patrem, Dominum omnipotentem, in Christum Jesum, Filium Dei, Dominum Deum nostrum, in Spiritum Sanctum.*”

In 325, Emperor Constantine, in his self-proclaimed role as Pontifex Maximus (Highest Pontiff—transforming it from a pagan

⁵ “Symbola—Creeds,” www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Symbola.htm

⁶ “Creeds in the Bible,” Creeds of Christendom, www.creeds.net/ancient/bible.htm

⁷ Schaff, Philip, “The Creeds of Christendom: Greek and Latin Creeds,” Volume II, pg. 17

title to a Christian one), called a council in the city of Nicaea to resolve the error attributed to Arius, namely, the teaching that the Son is of a different essence/substance (ἐτερούσιος) from the Father. The formulation of the Nicene Creed was intended to resolve the controversy by confessing that the Son was of the *same* essence as the Father (ὁμοούσιος). This formulation rejected also *similar* essence (ὁμοιούσιος) which was an attempted compromise.

Following the formulation of the Nicene Creed, a number of attempts were made to modify the simpler creed—the Apostles’. The Council of Antioch (341) tried to produce an alternate form. Some among them believed that ὁμοούσιος was inadequate since it was being used by a party who believed that there was *one* essence which was divided up between the Father and the Son. The resultant formulations of this council had little effect, since they did not adequately address the doctrinal differences.

Marcellus (341), Bishop of Ancyra and opponent of Arianism, formulated this version:

Πιστεύω εἰς θεόν πατέρα παντοκράτορα, καὶ εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ, τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν, τὸν γεννηθέντα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου, τὸν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου σταυρωθέντα καὶ ταφέντα, καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἀναστάντα ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἀναβάντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, καὶ καθήμενον ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ πατρὸς, ὃθεν ἔρχεται κρίνειν ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς, καὶ εἰς τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα, ἁγίαν ἐκκλησίαν, ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, σαρκὸς ἀνάστασιν, ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

In Marcellus’s creed, we see attempts made to formulate the creed in such a way that no self-respecting Arian would take it upon his lips. Since creeds were used to determine who would or would not be accepted into the fellowship, Marcellus’s creed probably served its purpose by excluding Arians.

It is difficult to understand why, after the formulation of the Nicene Creed, Marcellus would find it necessary to formulate his own version

of the Apostles' Creed. Since the Council of Nicaea did not actually remove the Arian heresy from the world, Marcellus may have found a new creedal formula necessary to address particular errors affecting his congregation.

Early Creeds

Old Roman Creed / Rufinus's Creed

By the beginning of the fifth century, a common symbol called "The Old Roman Creed," was being used. Rufinus of Aquileia (ca.400 AD) is credited by some as the author. However, there seems to have been minor distinctions between the creed of Rufinus and the Old Roman Creed. This writer was unable to determine which came first or, for that matter, if there was one that preceded both (probably) and on which they were based.

I believe in God almighty [the Father almighty (Rufinus)],

And in Christ Jesus, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried and the third day rose from the dead, who ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, whence he cometh to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, the life everlasting.

[Rufinus omits the final phrase.]

Gallican Creed

The Apostles' Creed as we have it today was developed in Western Gaul (Gallican). Whether or not there was a single author is not known to this writer. However, evidence exists that it proliferated in Gaul during the sixth and following centuries. It had reached Ireland by the seventh century.

I believe in God the Father almighty,

I also believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell, rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, sat down at the right hand of the Father, thence he is to come to judge the living and the dead.

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

The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the result of years of struggle against false doctrine. Instigated by Satan and advanced by his slaves, attacks against the Godhead were launched against every aspect of the divine nature. Faithful Christians searched the Scriptures. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they learned the truth and used the sword of the Spirit to fight back. In the process, they began to formulate confessional statements. These served as a mirror, reflecting the light of Scripture and exposing the errors that were plaguing Christians. As errors increased, the formulations were expanded and made more precise. This is the process that effected that precious credal statement that we call the Apostles' Creed.

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; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth 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.*⁹

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