

The Festival of the Holy Trinity
A Study of the Three Ecumenical Creeds
May 29/30, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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In Christ Jesus, who is one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit—one God uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty, and worthy of all praise—, dear fellow redeemed:

THE APOSTLES' CREED

Before He ascended into heaven, Jesus gave His disciples a great commission: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,”* He said. *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Mat. 28:18-20). Now if they were to baptize in this way, they would need to teach people who the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are.

This is what the Apostles' Creed does. But how did this Creed originate? An old tradition was that on Pentecost the twelve apostles gathered together, and each of them contributed a phrase to this statement of faith. While this is possible, the New Testament contains no mention of it happening. We call it the *“Apostles' Creed”* not because it was written by the apostles, but because it summarizes the doctrine, or the teaching, of the apostles. We don't know exactly when it was written, but a statement of faith with similar wording can be traced back to the year 150. So Christians have been reciting this Creed for nearly 2,000 years.

The Apostles' Creed contains three parts, the first about God the Father, the second about God the Son, and the third about God the Holy Spirit. From an early time, the Apostles' Creed was known as the *“Baptismal Creed.”* An adult who wished to be baptized was expected to recite this Creed and be able to explain its teachings before being baptized.

The shortest article of the Apostles' Creed is about God the Father. He is described as *“Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”* The earth and everything in outer space did not come about by chance. All things were created by the Father. Every amazing detail came from His own creative brilliance. He was able to do this because there is no limit to what He can do. He is all-powerful, *“Almighty.”*

The second and longest article of the Apostles' Creed is about God the Son. God the Father sent His only Son to take on human flesh in the virgin Mary's womb. The purpose was so that He could suffer and die on the cross in the place of all sinners. Having completed His atoning work, Jesus descended into hell to declare His victory to the demons and to the damned (1Pe. 3:18-20, Col. 2:15). Then He rose from the dead and showed Himself alive to hundreds of His disciples before ascending visibly into heaven. He now rules over all things at the Father's right hand until His visible return on the last day.

The third article of the Apostles' Creed tells us how the saving work of Jesus comes to us today. It comes by the power of the Holy Spirit who works in the holy Christian Church. He works in

the Church through the powerful Word and Sacraments of God – through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of Baptism and Holy Communion. Wherever the Gospel is, the Holy Spirit is, bringing the forgiveness of sins and preparing the saints of God for the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Let us confess our holy faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed on page 46 [then hymn #37].

THE NICENE CREED

The details of the origin of the Nicene Creed are clearer than those of the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 and finalized in 381. It was written to settle a doctrinal controversy about the nature of God. A theologian named Arius was trying to argue that God was not triune, but that only the Father was God from eternity. He said that the Son was perfect, but only a creature of God, which meant that "there was a time when he was not" (Arius' slogan).

Arius was very effective at spreading this unbiblical teaching, and many followed his ideas. With the church divided, the Roman emperor Constantine called for an ecumenical council, or a council for the entire Christian Church. 220 bishops traveled to Nicea for this council, including Arius. Through the efforts of a young pastor named Athanasius, who at the time was only twenty-nine years old, the council affirmed the teaching of the Bible that God is triune. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, of one substance, but are still three distinct Persons. By the grace of God, Arius' false teaching had been rejected.

The Nicene Creed is similar in many ways to the Apostles' Creed, but it is expanded for important reasons. God the Father is again confessed as the almighty Creator, but the phrase "of all things visible and invisible" is added. This is a reference to Colossians 1:16, which states that "by the Son," the Father created "all things... in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible." If the Son participated in every part of creation, He could not be a creature Himself.

The second part of the Nicene Creed clearly outlines the teaching that the Son is eternally God. The Son is "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." If the truth of the Bible had not been preserved, the certainty of our salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection would have been lost. If the eternal Son of God was not there on the cross for us, the scales of God's justice could not have been balanced. But because Jesus is true God, our guilt is atoned for and our sin is forgiven.

The third part of the Nicene Creed emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is also our eternal Lord. He is the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Because He is true God, He deserves to be worshipped and glorified. He inspired the words of the Bible by speaking through the prophets and apostles. And He continues to bring us the gifts of Jesus. Unlike the Apostles' Creed, this Creed specifically confesses "one Baptism for the remission of sins." This shows that the early Church rightly viewed Baptism not as our work for God as some of the Reformed and Baptist churches teach, but as God's work for us.

Let us confess our holy faith in the words of the Nicene Creed on page 47 [then hymn #38].

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

The Athanasian Creed bears the name of the great defender of the faith, Athanasius, who helped guide the formation of the Nicene Creed. But like the Apostles' Creed, which probably was not written by the apostles but is based on their teaching, so it is with the Athanasian Creed. The earliest evidence of this Creed dates to the mid-400s, fifty years or so after the death of Athanasius.

The Athanasian Creed is by far the longest of the three ecumenical creeds, and it is not structured like the other two. It was written to explain in detail the Bible's teaching about the one true God. It teaches that God is triune, one God in three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God is three people or that He has three personalities. "Triune" means that while distinctions can be made about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they share the same substance; they are one God.

Our minds are not able to comprehend this truth and sort it out. But then it shouldn't surprise us that there are things about the almighty, eternal God that are beyond our limited reason. We believe what God has revealed about Himself in His holy Word. We believe no more and no less than what the Bible teaches.

The very beginning of the Creed speaks about "the catholic faith." The word "catholic" means "universal," so the *catholic* faith is the *universal* Christian faith based on the Bible's teaching. It does not mean the *Roman Catholic* faith, which is not always based on the Bible. The end of the Creed says something surprising. It says, "they that have done good will enter into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire." This is actually a direct quote from Jesus (Joh. 5:29). He is not teaching us to trust in our own good works. He is referring to the good that is only possible by faith in Him, and also to the evil that is counted against those who reject Him.

Let us confess our holy faith in the words of the Athanasian Creed on page 29 (pastor, odd-numbered verses; congregation, even-numbered) [then hymn #43, vv. 1-4].

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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(Historical information from "I Believe: A Study of the Three Universal or Ecumenical Creeds"
by Bjarne W. Teigen, 1976)