

The Creed

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven and is seated 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 forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

History and Background of the Creed

This creed was given the designation of “The Apostles’ Creed” because it was believed that this creed was composed by the 12 apostles themselves. However, there is no Scriptural evidence for this claim, and the only historical evidence is the claim itself. Although we have little reason to believe that the creed was written by the apostles, the content of the creed is true to apostolic teaching.

The Apostles’ Creed finds its origin in the Western church, particularly the church in Rome. It developed as a means of preparing converts for baptism. They were to memorize the creed and meditate on its truths as they prepared to be baptized. When they were being baptized, they would then confess the creed as part of the baptism ritual.

The creed served as a means of instructing new converts in the essentials of the faith, and it was required that they assented to the truth of the creed in order to be baptized and received into the church.

The Trinitarian structure of the creed and the need for it to be confessed in connection to baptism was developed, at least in part, as an outworking of Christ’s command in **Matthew 28:19-20**, ***“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.”*** It was likely more simple in its original form, consisting only of basic affirmations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but grew to include more content as the church had to contend with false doctrine.

The creed became the most basic creed for the church in the West, while the Eastern church instead preferred to use the Nicene Creed. The creed has come to hold such an important place in the life of the church that it is almost unanimously used as one of three essential elements (along with the Ten Commandments and Lord’s Prayer) of any catechism that has been produced. The church in the West has come to see these elements as foundational to its instruction in the basics of Christian faith and living the Christian life. The Heidelberg Catechism explicitly expounds the creed, and the Westminster catechisms follow the contours of the creed without explicitly citing it.

Emphases and Theology of the Creed

I. *The Essentials of Christian Belief*

The Trinitarian structure of the creed demonstrates the importance of confessing faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from the early days of the church. Yet, we also see that the creed does not give a developed doctrine of the Trinity. The specifics of how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God is not expounded like in the Nicene Creed. This demonstrates the different purposes and origins of these two creeds. The Nicene creed was developed to answer particular heresies that had disrupted the church and was carefully constructed to answer those errors. The Apostles’ Creed was developed as a confession for the common believer in the basics of the faith and focuses on the essentials of what one must believe for eternal life.

II. *Christ’s Descent into Hell*

- A. This is the most unique and controversial element of the creed. This clause was not part of many earlier versions of the creed, and it is not immediately obvious what caused its insertion into the creed. The Scriptural basis for this clause comes from a few passages in particular: **Psalm 16:10 (cited in Acts 2:27; 13:35); Eph. 4:9; and 1 Pet. 3:18-20**. In light of these Scripture passages, we see that, rightly understood, this clause is consistent with the teaching of Scripture.
- B. The question is, what is meant by this clause? There are three major positions as to what it means.
 1. That after His death, Christ’s soul literally entered the realm of the afterlife other than heaven.
 2. That “hell” in this case is merely another name for death or the grave.
 3. That Christ’s sufferings in this life and on the cross constitute a descent into hell as He underwent God’s infinite wrath for sins.
- C. Understanding this clause
 1. Any belief that Christ entered the realm of those condemned to everlasting torment under God’s wrath or freed those who died prior to His crucifixion from a holding place so that they could go to heaven is not supported by the Scriptures (**Luke 23:43, 46**).
 2. Although it is true that Christ’s sufferings constituted a literal hell on earth for Him, this reading of the clause has nothing to do with the Scriptures cited.
 3. The translation of the word for “hell” here is inaccurate to our modern use and understanding of the word. In the creed, it does not mean the place of God’s everlasting wrath and torment but is rather referring to what the OT calls “Sheol” and what the NT calls “Hades.” These words were often translated as “hell” in older translations and can sometimes have that sense. However, they are usually more accurately translated as “the grave” or “death” and signify the state of death to which all people, both the righteous and the wicked, are subject.
 4. Therefore, we should understand this clause as teaching that Christ truly underwent everything that comes with human death. Not only was his body buried, but His soul passed from this world and He remained in this state of death until His resurrection (WLC 50).

III. *The Communion of Saints*

- A. This clause also stands out as unique in the creed. There is no parallel to it in the Nicene Creed and it is not necessarily clear as to what truth it is communicating distinct from “the holy catholic church.” Discerning the meaning of this clause is made more difficult in that there are not specific Scripture passages used to shed light on it.
- B. There are also three major positions as to what this clause means.
 1. That God’s people in all ages and places are united to and have communion with one another.
 2. That God’s people are able to gain communion with God because of the merit of the Saints.

3. That rather than reading “communion of saints” the clause means “communion in the holy” and speaks of the ministry of the sacraments giving God’s people communion with God.
- C. Understanding this clause
1. The idea that those who are especially holy gain merit for the rest of God’s people is unfounded in Scripture and was an interpretation of this statement that developed much later.
 2. Interpreting this statement as speaking of the sacraments is a valid and plausible translation of this clause. The idea that it communicates is also true to Scripture, in that the sacraments are a means of grace wherein we have communion with God (**1 Cor. 10:16; Gal. 3:27**). However, this understanding of the clause would be rather unprecedented in early creedal statements, and this interpretation of the creed also developed at a later time.
 3. Confessing that God’s people in all times and places have communion with one another makes the most sense. It is true to the Scriptures (**Heb. 12:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:11-22**), is the earliest interpretation of the creed on this point, and makes the most sense in context. This understanding fits as something that is a benefit wrought by the Holy Spirit and also makes sense in distinction to “the holy catholic church.” With this understanding, the creed effectively helps us to confess the visible church in “the holy catholic church” and the invisible church in “the communion of saints.”

Applying the Creed

The Apostles’ Creed gives us instruction on the bare minimum that is required to have a credible profession of faith as a Christian. While we are called to believe much more than what the creed says, as we are called to observe all that Christ has commanded (**Matt. 28:20**), we cannot believe less than what it says and have a legitimate claim to be a Christian. This is not to say that anyone who doesn’t believe some aspect of the creed can’t be saved. We are saved in Christ alone by the grace of God, not by our right understanding of particular truths. But those who would deny the essential truths of the creed have no right to claim to be Christians since their public testimony indicates otherwise. It is one thing to be ignorant of some specific aspects of what the creed affirms, but it is another to deny that truth and persevere in that denial. Although not everyone who confesses the Apostles’ Creed truly believes, the creed is a good starting point for evaluating whether a person believes the gospel.

The creed’s emphasis on the work of Christ highlights the heart of the gospel. Central to true faith is what Christ has done for those who believe. Knowledge of who Christ is and what He has done for believers is foundational for faith. We do not simply confess any Christ, but we are to confess the Christ, who is the Son of God, who became incarnate and accomplished redemption for our sakes. Any other Jesus is of no value for true faith. There is also nothing in the creed about the work of the church or believers in the world. Although the Lord calls us to love and do good to our neighbor, those who seek to make the works of the church central to what it means to be the church have displaced that which must be primary and foundational to all else the church is and does.

Just as we confess our faith in this Triune God when we recite the creed, so also He is to be our hope. The content of the creed is focused exclusively on God and what He has done to accomplish salvation and grant us everlasting life. The hope and faith of the Christian are, therefore, necessarily otherworldly. They are not centered on the blessings of this life or hope for improvement in our estate here but always looks to the life of the age to come and the blessings God has promised for His people in it.