

The Revised 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 worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets.
And I believe in one holy catholic 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.

The Original Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty,
maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
begotten from the Father,
only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father,
God from God, light from light, true God from true God,
begotten not made, of one substance with the Father,
through Whom all things came into being,
things in heaven and things on earth,
Who because of us men and because of our salvation
came down and became incarnate, becoming man,
suffered and rose again on the third day,
ascended to the heavens,
will come to judge the living and the dead;

And in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say,
“There was when He was not,
and, before being born He was not,
and that He came into existence out of nothing,
or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis
or substance, or is subject to alteration or change—”
these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

History and Background of the Creed

I. *The Council of Nicaea (325)*

A. Heresies Before Nicaea

1. Although prior to the ascension of Constantine, Christianity was a persecuted fringe religion in the Roman empire, there were still many pagan converts who brought in some of their pagan ideas to the church. This resulted in numerous heresies against which the church had to fight.
2. Major Heresies
 - a. **Gnosticism:** God is a pure spirit that could have nothing to do with the material creation. The Father of Christ was not the “evil” creator God of the OT. Christ was a lower spiritual being that settled upon the human person of Jesus. Christ came to reveal secret wisdom.
 - b. **Docetism:** Christ appeared to be a man but was actually a spirit that with no human body.
 - c. **Adoptionism:** The man Jesus was adopted into Godhood.
 - d. **Monarchial Modalism:** God is one person who sometimes reveals himself as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Holy Spirit.
 - e. **Arianism:** The Son is the first and highest creation of God.

B. Circumstances of the Council

1. The Council came about in response to the problem of Arianism. Constantine desired for unity in the church and called the Council to secure peace between the warring factions.
2. There were 3 parties at the Council: Alexandrians, Arians, and moderates. The moderates were by far the most numerous. The Arians presented a creed of their beliefs that was soundly rejected by the Alexandrians and moderates and the Council produced an anti-Arian creed. Of the 318 presbyters present at the Council, only Arius and 2 others refused to sign the creed.
3. Although the Council produced a creed condemning the Arians, it did not stop the controversy. Most of the moderates felt forced to sign and were not comfortable with the part of the creed that confessed that Christ is “one substance with the Father.”

II. *Between Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381)*

A. Athanasius Contra Mundum

1. Shortly after the Council, the Arians were accepted back into the church because they were willing to moderate their language, though they did not change their theology. Many moderates became sympathetic to the Arian cause against the language of the creed.
2. Athanasius was the defender of the theology of Nicaea. He became the target of those against Nicaea and was exiled from his church numerous times.
3. The beliefs of the emperors during this time had a large effect on the actions of the church. Many synods were called either to push back against Nicaea or reaffirm it. In 357, a council forbade any teaching concerning the “substance” of the Father and Son and essentially made Arianism acceptable in the church. This decision and the boldness of the Arians to be more explicit in their teaching caused many of the moderates to side with Athanasius.
4. In 381, with sentiment having shifted in favor of Athanasius and a favorable emperor on the throne, the Council of Constantinople was called. The Council fully affirmed the theology and language of Nicaea and affirmed an expanded version of the Nicene Creed. This finally brought an end to Arianism.

B. The Deity of the Holy Spirit

1. Although all the church believed in some kind of “Trinitarianism” because they confessed belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the way in which they understood the relation of these three varied. Even some who believed in the full deity of Christ did not believe the same concerning the Holy Spirit.
2. A fully developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit had not come about because the debate had focused on Christ’s relationship to the Father. However, as the key questions on Christ came into focus, it became clear that these questions also had to be asked concerning the Spirit.
3. Athanasius and three men who we now know as the Cappadocian Fathers defended the full deity of the Holy Spirit from the Scriptures. By 381, the church was not only ready to confess the full deity of Christ, but also of the Holy Spirit.

III. The “Filioque”

- A. The expanded version of the Nicene Creed that was approved at Constantinople is the most widely held and authoritative creed in the history of the church. There is no branch of Christianity that does not hold to it and confess it. However, there is division over a single clause that was later added into the creed by the Western church.
- B. Concerning the Holy Spirit, the finished creed originally said that He proceeds from the Father. However, the Western church, following the theology of Augustine, added the phrase “and the Son.” The East has seen this as an affront because they do not believe that the creed can be changed without the whole church coming together to do so and because they believe the theology is wrong. The West has retained the change because they believe it is true to the teaching of Scripture. This phrase was cited as the main reason for the split between the Eastern and Western church in 1054.

Emphases and Theology of the Creed

I. The “Substance” of God

- A. In formulating the true relation of the Son to the Father, the creed sought to guard against the heresies that have come before. The creed is clear that there is only one God and denies Trinitheism. The creed also guards against the idea that the Son was adopted to become God or that Father and Son are not really distinct, but simply God manifesting Himself in different ways. The creed also denies the Arian idea that the Son is merely a creation of God.
- B. The way the creed combats these ideas is by stating that the Son is of one substance or essence with the Father. This means that God is one, undivided being, who nonetheless exists in three persons. This distinction between the essence and persons of God became essential to how theology would speak of the Trinity going forward. The three persons are all fully God, each possessing every attribute of God in fullness. However, they also have personal properties that distinguish each from the other persons. The Father begets the Son and the Son is begotten of the Father. The Father and Son send the Holy Spirit and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son.
- C. We should not understand the word “substance” to mean that there is a physical material that makes up God. Rather, it is a word used simply to denote that there is an essence to the being of God that needs to be recognized when discussing the Trinity.
- D. The oneness of God is clearly demonstrated from numerous passages of Scripture: **Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:5.**

- E. That Father (**John 6:27; 8:54; 20:17; 1 Cor. 8:6**), Son (**John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8**), and Holy Spirit (**Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor. 3:16**) are all God is also clearly demonstrated in the Scriptures.

II. *The Eternal Generation of the Son*

- A. The understanding that the Son is one substance with the Father and Spirit and yet is begotten of the Father leads to the doctrine of eternal generation. The Son did not come to be begotten at a point in time but has always been begotten of the Father. The Father is Father eternally and the Son is Son eternally.
- B. The Scriptures attest to Jesus' as Son of God (**John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9**). However, there is some controversy concerning the understanding of the eternal generation of the Son. Some claim that the title of "Son" does not belong eternally to the second person of the Trinity but is a title that is given to Him in the incarnation. Some will also contend that the word sometimes translated as "only-begotten" should rather be translated as "unique" or "one and only."
- C. Although the idea of the title of Son being given to Christ only in the incarnation seems to have some validity, the case is overstated. The context of too many of the passages where Christ is identified as Son deal with eternal relations between Him and the Father, not ones He has in the incarnation (**e.g. John 1:18; 5:26**). In particular, the argument of Hebrews 1 seeks to prove the deity of Christ over against the angels by attributing to Him the title of "son." Concerning the translation of "only-begotten," while it can be debated, understanding that Christ is eternally the unique Son of God results in the same doctrine of eternal generation.

III. *The Procession of the Holy Spirit*

- A. Although the language of "substance" is not applied to the Holy Spirit in the creed, there is no doubt that it attributes deity to the Spirit by speaking of His procession from the Father and Son and by stating that He is to be worshiped and glorified with the Father and Son.
- B. The doctrine of the Spirit's procession comes from passages such as **John 15:26; 16:7; Gal. 4:6**. These verses make it very clear that the Father and Son send the Spirit to bring about God's purpose in redemption. However, the issue at hand in dealing with the idea of the procession is not whether the Spirit is sent in time by the Father and Son but whether He eternally proceeds from the Father and/or Son.
- C. The Eastern church has understood **John 15:26** to speak of the Spirit proceeding from the Father only and see no passage that speaks of an eternal procession from the Son.
- D. The Western church acknowledges that the sending of the Spirit by the Son in these passages is not talking about eternal procession. However, the West nonetheless contends there is good reason to confess that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well.
 - 1. The actions taken by the Trinity in creation and redemption reflect the eternal relations within the Trinity. For example, the Son is the one who becomes incarnate and dwells among us because He is the image of God from all eternity (**John 14:9; Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3**). Likewise, the Father and Son send the Spirit because He eternally proceeds from them.
 - 2. Passages such as **Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11** identify the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ/the Son, just as He is identified as the Spirit of the Father (**Matt. 10:20**). This relation to the Son is seen as being eternal and not something that comes about only in redemption.
- E. Although we can say that no one is saved or condemned by their view of the Spirit's procession, it is good and true to the Scriptures to confess that He proceeds from both Father and Son.

IV. *Baptism for the Remission of Sins*

- A. The language of baptism for the remission of sins comes from passages such as **Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:21**. As we can see, this phrase is very true to biblical language.
- B. How this phrase is to be understood is less clear. Writers in the early church all speak of baptism taking away sins, but they also affirmed the need for true belief for sins to be forgiven. Over time, the emphasis on the necessity of true faith was lost and the Roman Catholic Church came to believe in baptismal regeneration and the washing away of original sin and all individual sins prior to baptism occurring independent of faith.
- C. The WCF gives us helpful guidance to understand this phrase. WCF 27.2: ***There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.*** This means that, although baptism does not have the power to effect the spiritual reality of regeneration or forgiveness of sins, because it is a sign that points to these things, Scripture attributes these realities to the sacrament. This is not unique to baptism.
 1. The Scriptures speak of the OT sacrifices as atoning for sins (**Lev. 16; 4:20; Num. 15:25**) even though they also make clear that it is only the blood of Christ that actually atones for sins (**Heb. 10:1-10**). However, because the sacrifices were signs that pointed to the true sacrifice of Christ, those who had true faith really did receive the forgiveness of their sins and the sacrifices were the means of grace God had appointed to communicate that to them.
 2. God identifies circumcision as the covenant that He made with Abraham (**Gen. 17:10**). It is clear that circumcision was not the whole of the covenant, but that God had made many promises to Abraham and required him to walk by faith (**Gen. 17:1-8**). Nonetheless, because circumcision was the sign of the covenant, it could be identified with the covenant itself and all that goes with it.
 3. Christ calls the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper His body and blood (**Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25**). This did not mean that there were two bodies of Christ in the room that night or that the bread and wine we take literally turn into His body and blood. However, because these elements are the sign Christ appointed to communicate the reality of these things to us, we can have true communion with Him in His human nature by faith through this sign.
- D. Therefore, we can confess baptism for the remission of sins, recognizing that God signifies this reality to us in the sacrament and promises to seal it to us as we participate in it by faith.

Applying the Creed

I. *Being Careful in Our Beliefs*

- A. **Wrong belief has dire consequences.** We can't be content with saying that we believe in Christ but not care about what that means. Although we are not saved by right doctrine, worshiping a Christ who is a creation of God is to practice a different religion than worshiping a Christ who is very God come in the flesh (**Phil. 2:5-11**).
- B. **The need to seek maturity of faith.** One can have true and saving faith without understanding the intricacies of the theology of the creed. However, we should never be content with an immature faith. If eternal life is to know God (**John 17:3**) then we must seek to grow in that knowledge as much as we can in light of what God has revealed to us about Himself.
- C. **The need for being clear concerning our beliefs.** It is important that we utilize language that is clear for others to understand when teaching or interacting with others. Lack of clarity can cause unnecessary divisions or can allow those who hold destructive views to spread their views without repercussions (**1 Tim. 6:3-5**).
- D. **Avoiding a divisive spirit.** We should never allow a party spirit to influence us in theological disputes. There are things that must cause us to divide, but it should never be something that we seek. Nor should we overlook erroneous beliefs by those who happen to be on our "side" in a dispute. If the main way we conceive of ourselves is in opposition to others in the church, we are sinning against the one who is Lord of us all (**1 Cor. 1:1-13**).

II. *Worshiping Each Person of the Trinity*

- A. Gaining a greater understanding of the Trinity helps us to worship our Lord better. Our salvation would not be possible if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three distinct persons, yet one God.
- B. We should worship the Father for
 1. His electing grace, in which He set His love upon us in Christ before the foundation of the world (**Eph. 1:3-6**).
 2. Sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (**John 3:16**) and accepting His righteousness on our behalf (**2 Cor. 5:21**).
 3. Adopting us in Christ so that we become co-heirs with Him of salvation (**Eph. 1:5; Gal. 4:4-5**).
- C. We should worship the Son for
 1. Humbling Himself to become man (**Phil. 2:5-11**), fulfill the law for us (**Matt. 5:17**), submit Himself to our punishment (**Isa. 53:4-6**), rise again for our justification (**Rom. 4:25**), and intercede for us at the right hand of the Father (**Rom. 8:34**).
 2. Revealing the Father to us (**John 1:18**) and giving access to the Father (**Eph. 2:18**).
 3. Sending the Spirit to renew and sanctify us (**John 16:7**).
- D. We should worship the Holy Spirit for
 1. Speaking through the prophets (**2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21**) and giving us insight so that we can come to know God through the Scriptures (**1 Cor. 2:10-16**).
 2. Renewing the image of God in us (**Col. 3:10**) and causing us to be born again to a living hope in Christ (**John 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3**).
 3. Making us His temple (**1 Cor. 6:19**), ministering God's grace to us (**1 Pet. 1:2**), and shepherding us throughout our lives (**John 16:13**).
 4. Sealing us for redemption and causing us to persevere in the faith unto the end (**Eph. 4:30**).