

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CREEDS

*CITC adult Sunday School  
2025*



The Apostles' Creed  
The Nicene Creed  
The Athanasian Creed  
The Chalcedonian Formula

# Introduction to the Creeds of the Christian Church

## *On The Importance of Understanding the Value of the Historic Creeds of the Christian Church*

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### **FIRST THINGS- What's the Difference Between a Dogma and a Doctrine?**

**Dogma** *What must be believed for one to be considered a Christian.*

- **Dogma Has Inherent Universality:** Recognized across Christian traditions and essential for salvation.
- **Dogma Has Accepted Immutability:** Dogma is unchanging because it reflects core biblical truths

**Doctrine** *What is taught by different Christian traditions, reflecting deeper theological and practical insights.*

- **Doctrines Have Denominational Diversity:** Can differ between traditions or even within denominations without affecting salvation.
- **Doctrines Are Developmental By Their Nature:** Subject to deeper understanding and refinement over time.

### **I. Introduction: What Are Creeds and Confessions?**

#### **1. Definition**

- *Creeds:* Short, formal DOGMATIC statements of faith (e.g., Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed).
- *Confessions:* More detailed doctrinal statements often associated with specific Christian traditions (e.g., Westminster Confession, Heidelberg Catechism).

#### **2. Purpose**

- Summarize biblical truths.
- Provide clarity in understanding and teaching the faith.
- Unite believers around shared beliefs.

#### **3. Opening Question**

- “Why do we need creeds and confessions when we have the Bible?”

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### **II. Historical Significance and Biblical Basis**

#### **1. Historical Overview**

- *Fairbairn and Reeves:* “Creeds and confessions were birthed out of necessity, not as innovations, but as responses to the theological and pastoral crises of their time.”<sup>1</sup>
- Examples: Early creeds arose to counter heresies such as Gnosticism and Arianism.

#### **2. Examples of Biblical Support**

- *Biblical “Creeds”:*
  - These are frequently rendered as poetic declarations of God’s unique majesty and power, often considered a foundational confession of faith in God's sovereignty, and made as declarations of the believer’s faith.
  - **Exodus 15:11-**
  - **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**
  - **Psalm 19:1**
  - **Isaiah 6:3**
  - **Matthew 16:16**
  - **John 1:1, 14**
  - **Acts 2:36**
  - **Romans 10:9-10**
  - **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**
  - **Philippians 2:6-11**
  - **Colossians 1:15-20**
  - **Timothy 3:16**
  - **Hebrews 1:1-3**
  - **Revelation 4:11**

- Samuel Miller emphasizes that “the summary of doctrines contained in creeds is but a condensation of the essential truths revealed in Scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **3. Key Insight**

- Creeds and confessions function as a “chain of truth” linking the teachings of Scripture to the faith of successive generations.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Councils, Creeds, and Heresies Addressed

#### 1. Apostles' Creed

- Not tied to a specific council but likely formed in the early church as a response to Gnostic heresies.

#### 2. Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

- *Heresy:* Arianism – Denied the full divinity of Christ.
- *Creed:* Nicene Creed affirmed that Christ is “of one substance with the Father” (homoousios).

#### 3. Council of Constantinople (381 AD)

- *Heresies:*
  - Apollinarianism – Denied Christ’s full humanity.
  - Macedonianism – Denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
- *Creed:* Expanded Nicene Creed to affirm the full humanity of Christ and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

#### 4. Council of Ephesus (431 AD)

- *Heresy:* Nestorianism – Claimed Christ existed as two separate persons (divine and human).
- *Creed:* Affirmed the unity of Christ’s divine and human natures.

#### 5. Council of Chalcedon (451 AD)

- *Heresy:* Eutychianism/Monophysitism – Claimed Christ had only one nature after the incarnation.
- *Definition:* Chalcedonian Definition affirmed that Christ has two natures, fully divine and fully human, united in one person.

#### 6. Athanasian Creed (5th-6th Century)

- *Heresies:* Arianism, Tritheism, and Modalism.
- Emphasized the mystery of the Trinity and the necessity of correct belief for salvation.

#### 7. Reformation Era Confessions

- Fairbairn and Reeves: “The Reformation confessions were designed to articulate Scripture’s authority and to clarify the doctrines of salvation in response to Roman Catholic distortion.”<sup>1</sup>

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### IV. Practical Benefits of Creeds and Confessions

1. They Promote Theological Clarity
  2. They Foster Unity in the Church
  3. They Promote Faith Formation
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### V. Challenges and Misconceptions

#### 1. Common Objections

- “Creeds are unnecessary because they are man-made.”
- “Creeds limit the Spirit’s work.”

#### 2. Responses

- Creeds summarize biblical teaching, not adding to it but affirming it.<sup>1</sup>
- Miller: “Creeds ensure that we hand down the faith once delivered to the saints without alteration or loss.”<sup>2</sup>

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### VI. Application

#### 1. Encouragement to Study

- Spend some time reading and reflect on the Apostles’ Creed, the FIRST historical creed we will consider beginning next week
- Consider some of the issues you may already know about the Gnostic Heresy to see if you can see its connection to the statements made in the Apostles’ Creed.

#### 2. Closing Reflection

- “How might the creeds help you to live as faithful disciples in a world filled with conflicting beliefs?”

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### Footnotes

1. Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).
2. Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions: An Address* (1839).

## THE APOSTLES' 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 to hell<sup>1</sup>.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended to 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<sup>2</sup> church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Some manuscripts render this as 'hell'. Other forms use: 'Hades' "Grave" "The place of the dead." The intention seems to emphasize Jesus' physical human death and decent into the grave, rather than into the place of torment or condemnation ordinarily associated with our understanding of hell as a place of eternal punishment.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with solely the Roman Catholic Church, "catholic" as used in the Creed is intended to mean "universal," or "true." It does NOT refer to the Church of Rome.

# The Apostles' Creed

## Section 1: Historical Context

### 1. Origins of the Apostles' Creed:

- Rooted in the early church's baptismal confessions.
- Examples include:
  - The Roman Symbol ("Old Roman Creed"), an early statement of faith used in Rome, which closely resembles the structure and content of the Apostles' Creed.
  - Baptismal interrogations, such as "*Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?*", which formed a Trinitarian framework. These interrogations ensured doctrinal consistency and paved the way for creedal formalization
  - Regional formulas like those in North Africa, which emphasized belief in the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The North African traditions enriched the various emerging creeds with their pastoral focus on sin and salvation.
- Not directly authored by the apostles but reflects apostolic teaching. As Woodring notes, The Apostles' Creed emerged as a succinct summary of apostolic teaching, providing a foundation for Christian identity.
- **Accepted Historical Heritage:**
  - The Apostles' Creed is considered part of the church's historical heritage, serving as a bridge between the early baptismal confessions and later creedal formulations.
  - It is widely believed to have been codified in its near-final form by the late 4th to early 5th century, although its roots extend back to the 2nd century. The Creed's codification over time reflects the church's addressing various theological disputes and the need for an acceptable unity.
  - The Creed's development mirrors the church's historically evolving need to articulate its faith clearly amid doctrinal controversies and the demands of providing a faithful catechesis for the teaching of the faith.
- **Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi:**
  - A historical Latin phrase used throughout church history to describe the reciprocal relationship between worship and belief. "The rule of prayer ('lex orandi') is the rule of faith ('lex credendi').'" Faithful creeds are both shaped by and form the shape the liturgical life of the church.
  - The Apostles' Creed embodies this principle, as its content reflects the faith articulated in early Christian worship.
- **Tradition of Apostolic Contributions:**
  - There is a historical tradition that each of the twelve apostles contributed a phrase to the creed. This attribution is clearly more symbolic than historical, because there is not empirical evidence to support it. Nevertheless, it underscores the creed's role as a collective affirmation of apostolic teaching.
  - This tradition highlights the unity and comprehensive nature of the creed as a summary of apostolic faith.
  - While not actually penned by the apostles, the content does faithfully encapsulate their teaching and serves as testimony to their lasting influence on Christian doctrine.

## 2. Development Over Time:

- Evolved as a response to heresies **and** to unify the Christian faith.
  - The creeds were generally developed as much to defend against theological deviation as they were a declaration of theological unity.
- **Specific Heresies Addressed by The Apostles' Creed:**
  - **Gnosticism:** Rejected the dualistic belief that the material world is inherently evil. The creed affirms God as the "Creator of heaven and earth," emphasizing the goodness of creation.
  - **Docetism:** Opposed the denial of Christ's humanity. The phrases "born of the Virgin Mary" and "suffered under Pontius Pilate" affirm Jesus' true incarnation and historical existence.
  - **Arianism:** Combatted the view that Christ was a created being and not divine. The creed's declaration of Jesus as "His only Son, our Lord" underscores His divine nature. The Apostles' Creed directly challenges Arianism by affirming the eternal lordship and divine sonship of Christ.
  - **Marcionism:** Refuted the rejection of the Old Testament and its God. The acknowledgment of "God, the Father Almighty" integrates the God of Israel into Christian faith.
  - **Pelagianism (anticipatory/preemptive):** The creed's focus on forgiveness of sins and reliance on divine grace counteracts ideas of human self-sufficiency in salvation. By affirming the necessity of divine forgiveness, the Apostles' Creed precludes any human efforts as sufficient for salvation.
- **Role of Oral Tradition and Regional Variations:**
  - Oral tradition played a key role in preserving and transmitting the creed's content before it was formalized in writing. This method allowed flexibility and adaptability across regions.
  - Regional variations in wording reflected a diversity of early Christian communities, yet the core theological affirmations of the Creed remained consistent.
  - Despite linguistic and cultural differences in the oldest renderings, the essence of the creed served as a unifying thread for the early church.
  - **Examples of Regional Variations:**
    - In certain Gallic versions, the phrase "descended into hell" was expressed as "descended to the place of the dead," [e.g., "Hades" or "the Grave"] reflecting theological nuances but describing essentially the same thought. We can see such variations as more revealing an interpretive richness of the Creed in diverse contexts and cultures, rather than material theological and polemical disparities.
    - Early Eastern versions often omitted the phrase "the communion of saints," highlighting regional liturgical emphases.
    - The invocation of "God the Father Almighty" varied in phrasing, with some communities emphasizing divine omnipotence more or less explicitly.

## 3. Comparison with Other Creeds in Our Class Lineup:

- **Nicene Creed:**

- Originated from the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and expanded at the First Council of Constantinople (AD 381).
- Focused on clarifying Christological and Trinitarian doctrines in response to Arianism and other heresies.
- The Nicene Creed represents an apparently deliberate theological expansion of the Apostles' Creed, affirming not only belief but the eternal relationship within the Godhead.
- Used universally in liturgical settings across Eastern and Western traditions.
- **Athanasian Creed:**
  - Likely written in the 5th or 6th century and attributed to Athanasius, though its actual authorship remains uncertain.
  - Detailed and precise articulation of the Trinity and Christology, emphasizing the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
  - Unlike the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed is more polemical, and is aimed at confronting several other specific theological errors.
- **Chalcedonian Formula:**
  - Arose during a period of theological debate in the 5th century, addressing specific controversies within the church.
  - A theological and doctrinal statement defining the nature of Christ in response to heresies about His divinity and humanity.
  - Clarifies orthodox Christology, particularly against Nestorianism (separating Christ's natures) and Eutychianism (blurring His natures).
  - Explains the hypostatic union (the unity of Christ's divine and human natures).
    - Affirms that Christ is one Person in two natures: fully divine and fully human, without confusion, change, division, or separation.
  - Rooted in the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).
  - More precise, technical, and theological, aimed at resolving disputes among church leaders and theologians.

*There is a certain beauty in the Apostles' Creed in its simplicity and accessibility when compared to the more verbose theological depth and complexity of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.*

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## Section 2: Structure and Content

1. **Overview of the Creed:**
  - Divided into three sections reflecting the Trinity. The Trinitarian structure underscores the central tenets of Christian belief: creation, redemption, and sanctification
    1. God the Father
    2. Jesus Christ, the Son
    3. The Holy Spirit
2. **Key Statements:**
  - "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."
    - Affirmation of God's sovereignty and creation. This affirms a Creator who is both transcendent and intimately involved with His creation.
  - "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord..."
    - Emphasis on Christology: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

- Connection to salvation from eternity, within created history, and extending into eternity.
- "I believe in the Holy Spirit..."
  - Role of the Spirit in the Church, communion of saints, and life everlasting.

### 3. Theological Themes:

- Trinitarian theology as central to Christian faith.
  - Unity of the Church and eschatological hope.
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## Section 3: The Creed in Practice

### 1. Liturgical Use:

- Recited in worship, particularly in baptism and confirmation. The Apostles' Creed has long been a sort of cornerstone of liturgical practice, because it reinforces the faith of the baptized and calls to unite the congregation.
- Symbol of unity across denominations. The creed's enduring role in Christian worship reflects its power to transcend our divisions, reminding us to seek what is objective and unites above what has become subjective and divisive.

### 2. Personal Application:

- A guide for individual belief and prayer.
- Encouragement for daily reflection on the truths it affirms.

### 3. Relevance Today:

- Responding to modern challenges and questions of faith, as a sort of GPS to help us find our way back to "*Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls....*" (Jeremiah 6:16)
  - Strengthening our legitimate common and individual identity as Christians.
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## References:

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3. Houseal, Rivers/Collin. *Credo: Creeds, Confessions, Catechisms, and Covenants*. 2021, Nogginnose Press. ISBN 978-1-956611-00-7
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## THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, 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<sup>1</sup>; by whom all things were made; who for us 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<sup>2</sup>, and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son<sup>3</sup>; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets<sup>4</sup>;

And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Affirms Christ's divine nature in opposition to Arianism

<sup>2</sup> Addresses the errors of Apollinarianism, which claims that Jesus had a divine mind but lacked a human soul; upholds the full humanity and divinity of Jesus- In Doctrine called the *Hypostatic Union*

<sup>3</sup> A point of contention between the Eastern and Western Churches, primarily in added wording, because it was amended to the First Council of Nicaea version (325) at the First Council of Constantinople (381), and to which the Eastern Church has taken strong exception since "The East-West Schism" (1054).

<sup>4</sup> Affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit in opposition to Manicheanism, which taught that the Holy Spirit is a created entity, subject to the Father and Son as though merely a servant.

# The Nicene Creed

## Section 1: Historical Context

### 1. Origins of the Nicene Creed:

- The Nicene Creed was formulated in response to theological disputes within the early church, particularly concerning the nature of Christ.
- Key influences include:
  - The controversy surrounding Arianism, which denied the full divinity of Christ.
  - Earlier creedal statements such as the Apostles' Creed and regional baptismal confessions that laid the groundwork for a more detailed theological declaration.
  - The need for an ecumenical agreement among Christian communities to establish orthodoxy.
- The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) played central roles in its development.
- Unlike the Apostles' Creed, which evolved organically, the Nicene Creed was a product of conciliar deliberation and theological precision.

### 2. Development Over Time:

- Initially formulated at the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325) to refute Arianism, which claimed that Christ was a created being.
- Expanded at the First Council of Constantinople (AD 381) to clarify the role of the Holy Spirit in response to the "Pneumatomachian heresy" of Macedonianism.
- Macedonianism was a fourth-century heresy that denied the full divinity or personality of the Holy Spirit. This idea was popularized by a former bishop of Constantinople, a semi-Arian named Macedonius, and he became the namesake of the belief. Those who denied the Spirit's deity or personality were called Pneumatomachians, which means "opponents of the Spirit" or "Spirit fighters."
- According to the Pneumatomachians (Macedonians), the Holy Spirit was a created entity, subject to the Father and Son, in something of a servant role.
- The Creed was finalized to assert the full divinity of the Son and the Spirit, ensuring doctrinal unity within Christendom.
- Over time, variations emerged, most notably the *Filioque* clause (from the Latin word meaning "and from the son") in the Western Church, which added that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, a point of theological contention between Eastern and Western Christianity.
  - The differences between the Eastern and Western churches have been irreconcilable since at least 1054 ("The East-West Schism"), which mostly began when the Eastern Church took exception to the Western Church

- adding the Filioque Clause, which the Eastern church saw as a violation of the Council of Ephesus
- From the view of the West, the Eastern rejection of the *Filioque* denied the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son and was thus a form of crypto-Arianism (i.e., hiding Arianism by dissembling and concealing its parts)
- In the East, the interpolation of the *Filioque* seemed to many to be an indication that the West was teaching a "substantially different faith"

### 3. Specific Heresies Addressed:

- **Arianism:** The Nicene Creed declares Christ as "begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father" to affirm His divine nature.
- **Pneumatomachianism:** The expanded creed affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit, rejecting claims that the Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son.
- **Modalism:** By explicitly distinguishing the Persons of the Trinity, the creed refutes the idea that God merely manifests in different modes rather than being three distinct persons.
- **Apollinarianism:** The creed upholds Christ's full humanity and divinity, countering claims that He had a divine mind but lacked a human soul.

### 4. Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi:

- The Nicene Creed embodies the principle that worship and belief shape one another.
- Liturgically, it has been used in both Eastern and Western Christian traditions as a defining statement of faith, particularly in Eucharistic celebrations.

### 5. Comparison with Other Creeds:

- **Apostles' Creed:**
  - Simpler and earlier in form, used primarily in baptismal rites.
  - Less explicit on Christological and Trinitarian doctrines.
- **Athanasian Creed:**
  - More detailed and polemical, specifically defending the Trinity and Christology.
  - Focused on condemning heresies more directly than the Nicene Creed.
- **Chalcedonian Definition:**
  - Complements the Nicene Creed by further clarifying Christ's two natures as fully divine and fully human, "without confusion, change, division, or separation."

## Section 2: Structure and Content

### 1. Overview of the Creed:

- Divided into three sections corresponding to the Trinity:

1. God the Father
  2. Jesus Christ, the Son
  3. The Holy Spirit
- As with the Apostles' Creed, the trinitarian structure of the Nicene Creed underscores the central tenets of Christian belief: creation, redemption, and sanctification
2. **Key Statements:**
- **"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth..."**
    - Affirms monotheism and God's role as Creator.
  - **"And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God..."**
    - Declares Christ's divine nature and eternal generation from the Father.
    - Emphasizes His incarnation, suffering, resurrection, and ascension.
  - **"And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life..."**
    - Recognizes the Holy Spirit's divinity and active role in the Church and salvation.
3. **Theological Themes:**
- **Trinitarian Theology:** The creed articulates the doctrine of the Trinity with precision, differentiating between the persons while affirming their unity.
  - **Christology:** It provides a clear affirmation of Christ's divine nature, essential for orthodox Christianity.
  - **Ecclesiology and Eschatology:** The creed underscores the unity of the Church, the resurrection of the dead, and life everlasting.

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### Section 3: The Creed in Practice

1. **Liturgical Use:**
- Recited during the Eucharist in many Christian traditions, particularly in Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant services.
  - Symbol of unity in the universal Church, expressing shared doctrinal beliefs.
2. **Personal Application:**
- Serves as a guide for individual faith and doctrinal understanding.
  - Encourages deeper reflection on the mysteries of the Trinity and salvation.
3. **Relevance Today:**
- Offers clarity in an age of theological confusion and relativism.
  - Reinforces the historical and doctrinal continuity of Christian belief.
  - Encourages adherence to foundational Christian truths amidst modern theological debates.

## THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Whoever wills to be in a state of salvation, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith, which except everyone shall have kept whole and undefiled without doubt he will perish eternally.

Now the catholic faith is that we worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One, the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit; the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father infinite, the Son infinite, and the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet not three eternals but one eternal, as also not three infinites, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one infinite. So, likewise, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty; and yet not three almighty but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not three Gods but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet not three Lords but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be both God and Lord; so are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there be three Gods or three Lords. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son, not made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. So there is one Father not three Fathers, one Son not three Sons, and one Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity is to be worshipped. He therefore who wills to be in a state of salvation, let him think thus of the Trinity.

But it is necessary to eternal salvation that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. The right faith therefore is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man. He is God of the substance of the Father begotten before the worlds, and He is man of the substance of His mother born in the world; perfect God, perfect man subsisting of a reasoning soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, inferior to the Father as touching His Manhood. Who although He be God and Man yet He is not two but one Christ; one however not by conversion of the Godhead in the flesh, but by taking of the Manhood in God; one altogether not by confusion of substance but by unity of Person. For as the reasoning soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life eternal, and they who indeed have done evil into eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith, which except a man shall have believed faithfully and firmly he cannot be in a state of salvation.

# The Athanasian Creed

## Section 1: Historical Context

### 1. Origins of the Athanasian Creed

- The Athanasian Creed emerged in the early medieval period (5th–6th century), likely in Latin-speaking Western Christianity.
- Although traditionally attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria, modern scholars believe it was composed after his time.
- Key influences include:
  - The theological controversies surrounding the Trinity and Christology.
  - The earlier Nicene and Apostles' Creeds and the (historically/chronologically older) Chalcedonian Formula, all of which sought to clarify orthodox Christian doctrine.
  - The need to address lingering Arian and Semi-Arian views that persisted after the Council of Nicaea.
- Unlike the Nicene Creed, which was developed through conciliar deliberations, the Athanasian Creed was likely composed as a theological statement used for instruction and defense of orthodoxy.

### 2. Development Over Time

- The earliest references to the creed appear in the writings of Vincent of Lérins<sup>1</sup> (AD. 445) and later in Carolingian-era<sup>2</sup> documents.
- It was widely adopted in the Western Church, particularly in medieval Latin liturgies and used in theological education.
- Unlike the Nicene Creed, it never gained universal recognition in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.
- Over time, it became a standard of Trinitarian orthodoxy in Western Christianity, particularly within Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and ultimately Reformed traditions.

### 3. Specific Heresies Addressed

- **Arianism:** The creed explicitly affirms the full divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- **Modalism (Sabellianism)<sup>3</sup>:** By distinguishing the three Persons, the creed rejects the idea that God manifests in different modes rather than existing as distinct Persons.

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<sup>1</sup> **Vincent of Lérins** (died circa 445 AD) was a Gallic monk and author of several early Christian writings purporting to offer guidance in the orthodox teachings of Christianity. He was suspected of semi-Pelagianism, and opposed the Augustinian model of Sovereign Grace, instead favoring a type of prevenient grace ("preceding" or "enabling grace") different from Augustine's original doctrine, which the Romish Church and later Semi-Pelagian sects have adopted to support their understanding of mankind's "free will," whereby prevenient grace is a condition enabling man's "choice" of God, rather than grace remaining entirely a function of God's Decretal Election.

<sup>2</sup> The **Carolingian Empire** (800–887AD) was a Frankish-dominated empire in Western and Central Europe during the Early Middle Ages. It was ruled by the Carolingian dynasty, which had ruled the Franks since 751AD and the Lombards (in Italy) from about 774AD. In 800AD, the Frankish king Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome by Pope Leo III to transfer the status of "Roman Empire" from the Byzantine Empire to most of Western Europe. The Carolingian Empire is sometimes considered the first phase in the history of the Holy Roman Empire.

<sup>3</sup> **Sabellianism** is the belief that there is only one Person in the Godhead (it was one of the errors within the fourth century Arian Controversy). Sabellianism refused to acknowledge the distinct existence of the Three Persons within

- **Nestorianism**<sup>4</sup>: The creed upholds the unity of Christ's person, and rejects any efforts to divide His divine and human natures.
- **Apollinarianism**<sup>5</sup>: It asserts Christ's full humanity, countering the claim that He lacked a human soul.
- **Tritheism**<sup>6</sup>: The creed maintains that the three Persons are one God, not separate deities.

#### 4. Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

- The Athanasian Creed reinforces the principle that prayer and worship shape doctrinal belief and practice.
- It was historically included in Western liturgies, especially on Trinity Sunday, reinforcing its function as a catechetical and confessional statement.
- It appears, or is directly alluded to, in numerous written doctrinal documents in the Reformed Church traditions.
- Due primarily to its length, it is not *usually* read antiphonally (responsively), and has never been rendered in formats better suited to reading aloud during worship.

#### 5. Comparison with Other Creeds

- **Nicene Creed**:
  - Developed through ecumenical councils, more universally accepted across Christian traditions.
  - Focuses on affirming Christ's divine nature against Arianism.
- **Apostles' Creed**:
  - Simpler and more concise, used primarily for baptismal rites.
  - Does not include the detailed theological precision found in the Athanasian Creed.
- **Chalcedonian Definition**:
  - Clarifies the two natures of Christ (divine and human) but lacks the detailed Trinitarian exposition of the Athanasian Creed.

## Section 2: Structure and Content

### 1. Overview of the Creed

- Divided into two primary sections:

the Trinity. It was condemned as heresy by the early church fathers, and is still considered so by the majority of Christian churches.

<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of **Nestorius**, Patriarch of Constantinople (appointed in 428AD), which taught that Christ is asserted to have had distinct human and divine persons."

<sup>5</sup> **Apollinarianism** is a Christological heresy (Apollinaris of Laodicea, died 390AD) that argues that Jesus had a human body and sensitive human soul, but a divine mind and not a human rational mind, the Divine *Logos* taking the place of the rational human mind. It was deemed heretical in 381AD and virtually died out within the following decades.

<sup>6</sup> **Tritheism** is a *polytheistic, nontrinitarian*, heretical conception of God in which the unity of the Trinity is denied, by extension, monotheism is also denied. It asserts that, rather than being ONE God of three eternally consubstantial *Persons*, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three *ontologically* (in essence) separate gods.

## 1. The Doctrine of the Trinity

### 2. The Doctrine of Christ

- Emphasizes the necessity of holding the catholic (“universal” or “true”) faith for one’s salvation.

## 2. Key Statements

### • Opening Declaration:

- *“Whoever wills to be in a state of salvation, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith, which except everyone shall have kept whole and undefiled without doubt he will perish eternally.”*
- Stresses the necessity of true belief for salvation.

### • Trinitarian Section:

- *“So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not three Gods but one God.”*
- Affirms the unity of the essence of God while distinguishing the work of three Persons.

### • Christological Section:

- *“The right faith therefore is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man.”*
- Asserts the full divinity and full humanity of Christ.
- Describes the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Final Judgment.

### • Closing Declaration:

- *“And they that have done good shall go into life eternal, and they who indeed have done evil into eternal fire....This is the catholic faith, which except a man shall have believed faithfully and firmly he cannot be in a state of salvation.”*
- Emphasizes final eternal judgment and the necessity of right temporal belief.

## 3. Theological Themes

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### Trinitarian Theology:

- Provides one of the most detailed statements on the nature of the Trinity in Christian dogma.
- Distinguishes between the *unity of essence* (the “Ontological Trinity”) and the *distinction of Persons* (the “Economic Trinity”).

### • Christology:

- Asserts the full deity and humanity of Christ in line with the Chalcedonian Definition.
- Reinforces the Hypostatic Union (one Person, two natures) in the person of Jesus Christ.

### • Soteriology (Salvation Doctrine):

- Stresses our correct belief in the Trinity, and the our necessary dependence upon the redemptive work of Christ for our salvation.
  - Aligns with Augustinian theology on sovereign grace and divine judgment.
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### **Section 3: The Creed in Practice**

#### **1. Liturgical Use**

- Historically read in the Western Church, especially on Trinity Sunday.
- Used in medieval catholic liturgies; remains part of some Anglican and Lutheran traditions.
- Not widely used in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, despite agreement on much of its theology.
- Included (mostly by reference) in many doctrinal statements of various Reformed Church communions.

#### **2. Personal Application**

- Serves as a doctrinal guide for understanding the Trinity and Christology.
- Reinforces orthodox Christian faith, especially in contrast to heretical views still rampant in the culture.
- Can be used for meditation and theological reflection on core Christian beliefs.

#### **3. Relevance Today**

- Provides clarity on the doctrine of the Trinity in an age of theological relativism.
- Strengthens doctrinal integrity in Christian education and catechesis.
- Offers a firm foundation for inter-denominational discussions on common understandings of Christian orthodoxy.

## CHALCEDONIAN FORMULA

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood;

Truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin;

Begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood;

One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably;

The distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

# The Chalcedonian Formula

## Section 1: Historical Context

### 1. Origins of the Chalcedonian Formula

- The **Chalcedonian Definition** emerged from the **Council of Chalcedon in AD 451** as a response to Christological controversies.
- The Council was the 4<sup>th</sup> of 7 Ecumenical Councils of the Christian Church
- It sought to clarify the relationship between Christ's divine and human natures.<sup>1</sup>
- Influences leading to the Chalcedonian Definition:
  - The **Arian controversy** (denying Christ's full divinity), addressed at the **Council of Nicaea (AD 325)**.
  - The **Nestorian controversy**, which improperly divided Christ's divine and human natures.
  - The **Eutychian/Monophysite controversy**, which blurred the distinction between Christ's divinity and humanity.
- The Council of Chalcedon built upon previous creedal statements, particularly those from **Nicaea (AD 325)**, **Constantinople (AD 381)**, and the **Tome of Leo (AD 449)**.

### 2. Development Over Time

- The Chalcedonian Formula became the definitive statement on Christ's two natures in Western and Eastern Orthodox Christianity.
- The Chalcedonian Creed was written amid controversy between the western and eastern churches over the meaning of the incarnation<sup>2</sup>
- Phillip Schaff (in *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol 2.) "*The Creed is preceded in the acts of the Council by an express confirmation of the Nicene Creed in both forms, 'the Creed of the*

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<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Ferguson, December 2, 2019 article on Desiring God Website (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/chalcedon>): “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). The verses [the preamble to John’s Gospel] constitute the shortest, but perhaps profoundest, description of the incarnation in the New Testament. And the more you think about them, the profounder they seem to be. John underscores (1) Christ’s eternity (“In the beginning was the Word”) and (2) his deity (“and the Word was God”) in John 1:1. But he also places him ‘in the bosom/at the side of’ God (John 1:18), indeed ‘towards’ or perhaps more vividly ‘face-to-face with God’ (Greek *pros ton theon*). Christology was a life-and-death matter. Missteps could be dangerous. That was true then; it remains true today. Here is the mystery of deity incarnate. The wonder of it expands our minds and stretches our spirits: the Word who was face-to-face with God in the glory of eternity (John 17:5, 24) came to be face-to-face with us in this world, marked by temporality, changeability, and the shame of sin. Infinite and finite, eternal and temporal, Word made flesh. For the first four hundred years of the church’s history, her finest minds probed the significance of these words. How can we understand them? In what terms should we communicate them? Can we press on to the outer circumference of God’s revelation of his Son without falling over the edge into error and even heresy?”

<sup>2</sup> The Chalcedonian Creed was written in a time of fierce controversy between the ecclesiastical influence of the Byzantine emperor, and the supremacy of the Roman Pope. The western churches readily accepted the creed, but some eastern churches did not. The adopted Creed specifically maintained the two distinct natures of Christ (divine and human) over against teaching of Eutyches -- that Christ had only one nature, a mixture of human and divine. Eutychianism is also known as monophysitism from *monos* (single) and *physis* (nature), which confuses both Christ’s true humanity and his true deity.

*'three hundred and eighteen holy Fathers of Nicæa,' and 'the Creed of the hundred and fifty holy Fathers who were assembled at Constantinople.' The Fathers of Chalcedon declare that 'this wise and saving Creed [of Nicæa] would be sufficient for the full acknowledgment and confirmation of the true religion; for it teaches completely the perfect doctrine concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and fully explains the Incarnation of the Lord to those who receive it faithfully.' The addition of a new Creed is justified by the subsequent Christological heresies (Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism). After stating it, the Synod solemnly prohibits, on pain of deposition and excommunication, the setting forth of any other Creed for those 'who are desirous of turning to the acknowledgment of the truth from Heathenism and Judaism.'*

- While widely accepted, it led to a schism with the **Oriental Orthodox Churches**<sup>3</sup>, which rejected the formula as leaning toward **Nestorianism**.
- It influenced later **Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic** confessions, serving as the foundation for classical Christology.
- The formula was incorporated into subsequent doctrinal formulations, including the **Westminster Confession of Faith** and **Reformed Scholasticism**.

### 3. Specific Heresies Addressed

- **Nestorianism**: Rejected by affirming Christ as "one Person in two natures."
- **Eutychianism (Monophysitism)**: Rejected by asserting that Christ's two natures are distinct but united.
- **Apollinarianism**: Countered by affirming that Christ possesses a full human soul, not merely a divine mind in a human body.
- **Docetism**: Rejected by asserting the full humanity of Christ.

### 4. Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

- The Chalcedonian Formula reflects how **liturgical practice influences theological belief**.
- It shaped Christological worship and confession in both **Eastern and Western traditions**.
- It emphasized the need for clarity in **preaching, hymns, and theological instruction** concerning the two natures of Christ.

### 5. Comparison with Other Creeds

- **Nicene Creed** (AD 325 & 381):
  - Focuses on Christ's **divine nature** in opposition to Arianism.
- **Apostles' Creed**:

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<sup>3</sup> The Oriental Orthodox Churches, also called the "Old Oriental Orthodox Churches" did not recognize the validity of the Chalcedonian Creedal Statement. The Oriental Orthodox Churches include the Syrian (also known as "The Alexandrian Church"), Armenian, Malankara-Indian, Eritrean, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

- Less precise Christology; more suited for baptismal confession.
  - **Athanasian Creed:**
    - Provides a **Trinitarian** and **Christological** framework, with a strong emphasis on salvation.
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## Section 2: Structure and Content

### 1. Overview of the Chalcedonian Definition

- The **Chalcedonian Formula** affirms:
  - **One Person in two distinct natures** (divine and human).
  - Without **confusion, change, division, or separation**.
  - That Christ remains **fully God and fully man**.

### 2. Key Statements

- **The Unity of Christ:**
  - "One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten."
- **The Two Natures of Christ:**
  - "Acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."
- **The Incarnation and Redemptive Work:**
  - Christ is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father in divinity and with humanity in flesh.
- **Theological Precision:**
  - Avoids both **Nestorianism (excessive separation of natures)** and **Monophysitism (blurring of natures)**.

### 3. Theological Themes

- **Trinitarian Theology:**
    - Reinforces the **Nicene doctrine** by maintaining Christ's divine nature as eternal Son.
  - **Christology:**
    - Balances **unity and distinction** in the Person of Christ.
  - **Soteriology:**
    - Affirms that salvation requires Christ to be **fully divine (to save)** and **fully human (to represent humanity)**.
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## Section 3: The Chalcedonian Formula in Practice

### 1. Liturgical Use

- Incorporated into **Eastern Orthodox** and **Roman Catholic** liturgical traditions.
- Used in **Reformed** and **Lutheran confessions** as a **Christological standard**.

- Forms the **foundation of doctrinal preaching and theological education.**

## **2. Personal Application**

- A doctrinal safeguard against modern **heretical Christologies**.
- Guides believers in understanding **who Christ is and how He redeems humanity**.
- Encourages reflection on the significance of Christ's **incarnation, atonement, and intercession**.

## **3. Relevance Today**

- Clarifies **orthodox Christology** in contrast to modern theological distortions.
- Provides a **firm theological anchor** in discussions on the **Trinity and the Person of Christ**.
- Essential for upholding **historic Christian faith** amid contemporary **theological confusion**.