

**Ancient Church History**  
**Rev. Charles R. Biggs**  
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**Important Councils and Creeds of Christendom**

What is a confession of faith in relation to a creed? Matt. 10:32, 33; Romans 10:9,10; Matt. 16 (the first Christian confession or creed). Where there is faith, there is also a profession of that faith.

A confession or creed can come from Scriptural study without any individual authorship (such as the Apostle's Creed); or from an ecumenical council (such as the Nicene or Chalcedon); or from the Synod of a particular church (such as the decrees of the Council of Trent; the Articles of Dort; the Westminster Confession and Catechisms); or from a number of divines specifically commissioned for such work by ecclesiastical authority (such as the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; the Heidelberg Catechism; the Form of Concord); or from an individual (such as the Augsburg Confession by Philip Melancthon; the Catechisms of Luther; the second Helvetic Confession by Bullinger).

In Protestantism the authority of creeds must be submitted to the light and revelation of Scripture. The Scripture is the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In contrast, the Greek Church holds that from the Council of Nicea (325AD) to the Second Nicea (787AD), these councils were infallible. Rome extends the same claim to the Council of Trent (1546-1564) and the Second Vatican Council (1962). Both these claims cannot logically be true, since both of these "infallible" Councils contradict each other on important points, especially the authority of the Pope.

The Creeds of Christendom are divided into four classes: (1) The Ecumenical Councils of the Ancient Catholic (Universal) Church (the orthodox doctrine of God and of Christ and the fundamental dogmas of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation); (2) The Symbols of the Greek or Oriental Church (the Greek faith is set forth in distinction from Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Protestant Churches. They differ from Roman Creeds in the doctrines of the procession of the Holy Spirit and the papacy. They are in agreement over the rules of faith such as justification by faith, the church and the sacraments, worship of saints and relics, and the hierarchy and the monastic system; (3) The Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church (the distinctive doctrines of Romanism which were opposed by the Reformers are from the Council of Trent to the Vatican Council in 1870); (4) The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches (Most of them date from the Reformation and agree with the Ancient Catholic creeds but ingraft the Augustinian doctrines of sin and grace, and several doctrines in anthropology and soteriology (justification and atonement) which had never been previously settled by the Church in an exclusive way).

The Protestant Creeds are either Lutheran or Reformed. The Lutheran were all made in Germany from AD 1530 to 1577, the Reformed arose in different countries: Germany, Switzerland, France, Holland, Hungary, Poland, England, Scotland and wherever the

influence of Calvin and Zwingli extended. They both agree almost entirely in their theology, christology, anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology, but they differ in the doctrines of divine decrees and of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments, especially the mode of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

Later Evangelical denominations: Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Arminians and Methodists acknowledge the leading doctrines of the Reformation, but differ from Lutheranism and Calvinism in a number of articles such as anthropology, the Church, the sacraments, and especially on Church polity and discipline. Their creeds are modifications and abridgments rather than enlargements of the old Protestant, Reformed Creeds. Many Churches today have only the creed of the particular pastor in the pulpit.

The progression of development and articulation of the Creeds are much like the revealed Systematic Theology of the Scriptures. There is a building pattern to the way the truths of Scripture are laid upon the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets.

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- (2) The Symbols of the Greek or Oriental Church
- (3) The Creeds of the Roman Catholic Church
- (4) The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches.

The first four creeds including the Apostle's are accepted by all the church whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox.

**Quote from the Scots Confession of 1560:**

"So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them. But if men, under the name of a council, pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or to make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrine of devils, drawing our souls from the voice of the one God to follow the doctrines of men. The reason why the general councils met was not to make any permanent law which God had not made before, nor yet to form new articles for our belief, nor to give the Word of God authority...but the reason for councils, at least of those which deserve the name, was partly to refute heresies, and to give public confession of their faith to the generations following, which they did by the authority of God's written Word, and not by any opinion or prerogative that they could not err by reason of their numbers. This, we judge, was the primary reason for general councils. The second was that good policy and order should be constituted and observed in the Kirk (church) where, as in the house of God, it becomes all things to be done decently and in order."

1. The First Ecumenical, or Council of Nicea (325)- lasted two months and twelve days. Three hundred eighteen bishops were present. The Emperor Constantine was also present. To this council we owe the Creed (*symbolum*) of Nicea, defining against Arius the true Divinity of the Son of God (homousios / omousioV), and the fixing of the date for keeping Easter (against the Quartodecimans).

2. The Second Ecumenical, or First General Council of Constantinople (381)- under Pope Damasus and the Emperor Theodosius I, was attended by one hundred fifty bishops. To the above mentioned Nicene creed it added the clauses referring to the Holy Ghost and defined His deity.
3. The Third Ecumenical, or Council of Ephesus (431)- more than two hundred bishops, presided over by Cyril of Alexandria representing Pope Celestine I. It defined the true personal unity of Christ, declared Mary the Mother of God (bearer of God- QeotokoV) against Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, and renewed the condemnation of Pelagius.
4. The Fourth Ecumenical, or Council of Chalcedon (451)- one hundred fifty bishops under Pope Leo the Great and the Emperor Marcian defined the two natures (divine and human) in Christ against Eutyches, who was excommunicated.
5. The Fifth Ecumenical, or Second General Council of Constantinople (553)- of one hundred sixty five bishops under Pope Vigilius and Emperor Justinian I, condemned errors of Origen and certain writings of Theodoret, Theodore Bishop of Mopsuetia (The Three Chapters). It further confirmed the first four general councils, especially that of Chalcedon whose authority was contested by heretics.
6. The Sixth Ecumenical, or Third Council of Chalcedon (680)- under Pope Agatho and the Emperor Constantine Pogonatus, was attended by the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Antioch, one hundred seventy four bishops, and the emperor. It put an end to Monothelism by defining two wills in Christ, the Divine and the human, as two distinct principles of operation.
7. The Seventh Ecumenical, or Second Council of Nicea (787)- was convoked by Emperor Constantine VI and his mother Irene, under Pope Adrian I, was presided over by the legates of Pope Adrian. It regulated the veneration of holy images.

### **The Nicene Creed**

The Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted and used brief statements of the Christian Faith. Many groups that do not have a tradition of using it in their services nevertheless are committed to the doctrines that it teaches (such groups as: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists).

Traditionally in the West, the Apostle's Creed is used at baptisms, and the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist. The East uses only the Nicene Creed.

As the Apostle's Creed was developed and drawn up, the chief enemy was gnosticism, which denied that Jesus was truly man; the emphasis of the Creed reflects this concern. However, when the Nicene Creed was drawn up, the chief enemy was Arianism, which denied that Jesus was fully God.

### **What is Arianism?**

Arius was a presbyter in Alexandria in Egypt in the early 300's (4<sup>th</sup> c.). He taught that the Father, in the beginning created (or begot) the Son, and that the Son, in conjunction with the Father, then proceeded to create the world. The result of this was to make the Son a created being, and hence not God in any meaningful sense (but the closest thing to it). Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, sent for Arius and questioned him. Arius did not recant from his position and was excommunicated by a council of Egyptian bishops. The Arian position has been revived in our own day by the Watchtower Society, or the Jehovah's Witnesses, who hail Arius as a great witness to the truth.

Emperor Constantine summoned a council of Bishops in Nicea, and in 325 the Bishops of the Church, repudiated Arius and produced the first draft of what is now called the Nicene Creed.

Athanasius was the defender of orthodoxy in this period that opposed Arius. He became Bishop of Alexandria after the death of Alexander and was the spokesman for the full deity of Christ.

### **Witnessing the Truth to Ancient and Modern Arians**

#### **Three Distinct Persons as Deity**

##### **The Father:**

He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Ps. 2:7) / ...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...(1 Peter 1:2; cf. John 1:17; 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:11).

##### **The Son:**

He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Ps. 2:7; cf. Heb. 1:1-13; Ps. 68:18; Isaiah 6:1-3). / As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17).

##### **The Spirit:**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Gen. 1:1-2; cf. Ex. 31:3; Judges 15:14; Isaiah 11:2). / Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit...? You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4; cf. 2 Cor. 3:17).

#### **Persons of the Same Essence: Attributes Applied to Each Person**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Son</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>
<b>Eternal</b>	<b>Ps. 90:2</b>	<b>John 1:2; Rev. 1:8</b>	<b>Heb. 9:14</b>
<b>Omniscience</b>	<b>Jer. 17:10</b>	<b>Rev. 2:23</b>	<b>1 Cor. 2:11</b>
<b>Omnipresence</b>	<b>Jer. 23:24</b>	<b>Matt. 18:20</b>	<b>Ps. 139:7</b>
<b>Holiness</b>	<b>Rev. 15:4</b>	<b>Acts 3:14</b>	<b>Acts 1:8</b>

### **Equality with Different Roles: Acts involving all Three Persons**

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Son</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>
<b>Creation of the World</b>	<b>Ps. 102:25</b>	<b>Col. 1:16</b>	<b>Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13</b>
<b>Creation of Man</b>	<b>Gen. 2:7</b>	<b>Col. 1:16</b>	<b>Job 33:4</b>
<b>Baptism of Christ</b>	<b>Matt. 3:17</b>	<b>Matt. 3:16</b>	<b>Matt. 3:16</b>
<b>Death of Christ</b>	<b>Heb. 9:14</b>	<b>Heb. 9:14</b>	<b>Heb. 9:14</b>