

We Believe: The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed

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Part One: "We Believe:" Origins and functions

The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are important elements in our regular worship of God. We stand together and profess them. But many people haven't engaged their claims since Confirmation class (or perhaps not at all). What does it mean to believe these creeds?

You can find the creeds in the Book of Common Prayer, 1979:

The Apostle's Creed is found on page 53 and 66 in an older English translation, and on pages 96 and 120 in a contemporary translation (each of these from Morning and Evening Prayer). The Apostle's Creed is also integrated into the Baptismal Covenant on page 304, in the first three questions. The Nicene Creed can be found on page 326 (an older translation) and 327 & 358 in a more contemporary translation (these two from the Eucharist).

We:

Notice that the Apostles' Creed, and the older translation of the Nicene Creed begin "I believe," but the newer translation of the Nicene Creed begins "We believe." Why?

Both creeds have early origins, though the Apostles' Creed continued to develop slightly in the Western church after the council of Nicaea. The Apostle's Creed developed from the baptismal liturgy, where each candidate would answer the questions with "I believe." The Nicene Creed, building on early forms of the Apostles' Creed, came from a declaration of a council of Bishops at Nicaea in AD 325, (and from two other councils) who were declaring a common statement of "We believe." When the church later used the Nicene Creed in worship, it was usually rendered "I believe." In the late 20th Century, a new common English translation was prepared among several Protestant denominations. This translation uses "We believe" in keeping with the conciliar form of the declaration.

Saying "We believe" then indicates that this is the faith of the church—the faith of the whole community of Christians, and of those who came before us. We place ourselves within this continuity and common identity when we say "we believe." We put our trust not only in the God we profess, but in the Christian community through whom we came to know God.

But, as can be seen in the history of both creeds, "We" includes "I." I have heard some people (even some clergy) suggest using "we" as a sort of loophole for disbelief or dissent. The line of reasoning goes 'I don't believe these parts, and you don't believe those parts, but we patch our belief together to cover the whole, so therefore 'we' believe the whole thing, even though each of us doesn't.' I would suggest that this line of reasoning is a bit more than disingenuous. When the church proclaims the creed, we intend to proclaim both the faith of the whole church, and the faith of each individual. We both affirm the church's belief and our individual assent to that common proclamation.

We Believe:

Why a creed?

The creeds are used as examination questions at Baptism. They are used as affirmations of the community in worship. They are used for teaching and setting boundaries for Christian belief and teaching. We could say “We are spiritual people” or “we follow the ethics of Jesus.” Instead, our foundational statement centers around doctrine—on belief. Why?

“Profession of Faith” is one function of the creed: we claim this belief as our own, along with its consequences. In the early centuries of Christianity, this profession was a claim on one’s self that had life and death implications. They set the person (and the church) apart from the rest of society for whom such statements were subversive to good society and to the government itself (since the emperor was a god to be worshiped).

“Symbol of Faith” is an ancient description of the creed. The creed is a symbol of our understanding of God, and our fidelity to God. The creed as a common symbol also connects us together as the church, describing who we can trust the church to be—what Christians can expect to take for granted as our common identity, implying the common mission we have.

“Rule of Faith” thus applies to the creed. We don’t follow a vague spirituality, but a specific understanding of God and the world. The creed functions as a measure of faithfulness against a standard, providing clarity in the proclamation of who we are as Christians. The Rule of Faith provides a lens for interpreting scripture. In the early centuries of the church, various unusual ideas claimed the Christian mantle—even some that used scriptures to their ends. So the church used creedal statements to act as boundary markers and guides to how to understand scripture on central issues of our understanding of God. Consider Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons of today.

“Definition of Faith” is another function of the creeds. Christianity is not a custom-made theoretical system, but rather a belief grounded in history. We believe that God revealed himself in history, so we are not free to invent our own ideas, as attractive as they may be, but rather we hand down and clarify for further generations the revelation we have inherited. This helps us to avoid confusion or distortion of the message. Some people might object that the names of God are not so much important as our relationship with God. But we might answer “yes, but with whom are you in relationship?” Knowing my wife is more important than knowing various characteristics about her. But unless I know how to properly identify my wife, I might be in relationship with an imposter.

The value of heresy: indentifying God in a crowded room. As confusions and distortions (and alternative views of God) arise, the creeds became a great tool for clarification. The earliest distortion (from Gnosticism) said that though Jesus is divine, he’s not really fully human, nor did he really die. Creedal statements then clarified that he was born, suffered, died, and was buried. That ties up those loopholes! Later, Arius suggested that Jesus was divine, but not fully divine, rather, a divine creature. So the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople clarified that he is “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one being with the Father, through whom all things were made...” Thus more loopholes are tied up.

So were such clarifications made up out of whole cloth? Or is there any continuity that gives us some trust in the creeds?

Origins of the Creeds:

Both creeds come from common origins, though their final formulations developed separately and for different reasons. Skim the following citations to find threads that link these final formulations to their historical antecedents. Listen for echoes of the language of the creeds.

The primary source, of course, is the Bible. Jews have a primary credal statement which helps to identify God against historically competing religions and ideas, especially asserting one God. This is called the “Shema” from the Hebrew word that begins it.

The Shema: Deuteronomy 6:4-5

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”
Or *“Hear, O Israel, The LORD our God, The LORD is one...”*

Matthew 28:19

“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,”

Thus, candidates are asked at Baptism three questions: one about belief in the Father, one regarding the Son and one regarding the Holy Spirit. This is the seed that grew into the creeds with their three clauses.

There are other credal elements found in the New Testament, including 1Corinthians 15:3-7:

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

Following the New Testament, we have records that show earlier use of phrases that made their way into the creeds:

Ignatius of Antioch, c.107

Jesus Christ...who is of Mary, who was truly born, ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died...who was truly raised from the dead...

Epistula Apostolorum, c. 150 includes *“in the Holy Church, and in the forgiveness of sins.”*

Justin Martyr, c.165

“We worship the God of the Christians, whom we consider One from the beginning, the creator and maker of all creation, visible and invisible...”

Der Balyzeh Papyrus, c.200+

*Confess the faith...
I believe in God the Father Almighty [pantokratora]
And in his only begotten Son,
Our Lord, Jesus Christ,
And in the Holy Spirit,
And in the resurrection of the flesh
In the holy catholic Church.*

Irenaeus c. 190

[the church]...believes in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our Salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God...

Tertullian c.200 (“rule of faith” “handed down from the apostles”)

...that he suffered, died, and was buried, according to the scriptures, and, having been raised up by the Father and taken back into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father and will come to judge the quick and the dead...

Hippolytus c.215 (appearing in various places afterward; this is known as the “**Roman Symbol**”)

*Do you believe in God the Father all-governing [pantokratora]?
Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was begotten by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died and was buried and rose the third day living from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat down on the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?
Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy Church, and in the resurrection of the flesh?*

Marcellus c.340

Nearly matches Hippolytus; includes “the forgiveness of sins” and “the life everlasting.”

Rufinus c. 404 (in his commentary “on the apostles’ creed”)

Very similar, includes “he descended to hell”

North Africa c.400 (from Augustine’s record)

Includes the word “catholic” as did some earlier formulas.

Textus Receptus c. 700; this is the final form of the Latin “Apostles’ Creed”

Includes “the communion of saints”

We will examine each clause to track its continuity with the apostolic faith. But this shows the development from an early time, based on the Biblical narrative, elaborating points that heresy had made controversial. The Apostles’ Creed (or its antecedents) was used in the West as a Baptismal affirmation, developing into separate use from the Nicene Creed. The Eastern church does not use the Apostles’ Creed, but only the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed:

The early formulations noted above were the basis of the statement of the Bishops Council of Nicaea in 325. This was the basis of a slightly modified version declared at the Council of Constantinople in 381. What we call the “Nicene Creed” is this creed from 381, technically called “The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.” This creed gained wider use in liturgy after its affirmation at Chalcedon in 451, and was used widely in the Eucharist by the 6th century, dominating in the East as it does today. The East does not use the Apostles’ Creed.

The church in the West modified this creed by clarifying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son.” This phrase is known by its Latin rendering “Filioque.” Augustine’s theology influenced the use of this phrase (just a word in Latin), especially to further clarify the doctrine of the Trinity. The creed with the filioque was affirmed by Western Council of Toledo in 589, which directed its use in Eucharist. Charlemagne (AD 800) incorporated it into the liturgy of his chapel, after which this version of the Nicene Creed came into wide use in the West.

At this time, the filioque became a point of contention with the East, culminating in the schism of 1054 between the Roman Catholic West and the Eastern Orthodox East. The East primarily objects to editing of a world-wide creed without the involvement of the whole church (the East was not involved in the Council of Toledo, nor were other parts of Christendom). They also raise subtle theological concerns about properly distinguishing the Spirit from the Son and the Son from the Father. The West might answer back that the Son’s role in the gift of the Spirit is important enough to clarify in this fashion. Both positions are supported in Scripture. We will review this more when we discuss the Holy Spirit.

Other important creedal statements (Book of Common Prayer, p.864):

- **Chalcedon in AD 451**
This Council statement clarifies the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. We don’t use this in worship, but it remains an important statement to both Eastern and Western Christianity.
- **“The Athanasian Creed”** between AD 440-540
This is a vigorous exposition on the doctrine of the Trinity, but probably not penned by Athanasius himself. Considered important to theologians and the framers of the Book of Common Prayer
- **Protestant statements** (such as the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession),
and the **Anglican 39 Articles** (1571, 1662, 1801).
These articles address reformation-era arguments (with fairly protestant answers), and were modified by the Episcopal Church in 1801 to apply to the context of the United States.
- The **Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral** of 1886 and the Lambeth Resolution II of 1888.
These two statements from councils of Anglican bishops describe the core of what Anglicans feel necessary as we seek unity among the divided churches of Christianity.

Why “Belief?”

What do we mean by this word? Is this a purely intellectual exercise? When we stand and declare “We believe in one God...” we are not making a statement like a scientific assessment. The creeds are not expressed as one might state “I believe in the Loch Ness Monster.” You may very well believe in the Loch Ness Monster, but such a statement makes no demands on you personally, makes no changes to your life, makes no great shift in your understanding of the world and especially does not claim any kind of special and intimate relationship between you and the Loch Ness Monster. But those things are precisely what profession of the creed does for us and God.

When the New Testament uses the word “belief,” there is more than a simple truth-claim involved, especially when applied to Jesus. The word in Greek is closely related to the word for faith or fidelity.

pisteuo- believe

pistis-faith

pistos-faith/faithful (adjective)

Jesus to Thomas: “do not doubt but believe”

“Be/become not *a-pistos* but *pistos*”

“be not faith-less but faith-ful”

“do not dis-believe but believe”

When Jesus asks the blind man if he believes in him, Jesus is not asking him “do you believe I exist” but “**do you trust me?**”

Faith/trust/credo: ‘I set my heart on’/I depend on/I have confidence in

The Creeds and trust:

- The creed from the outset is about **who we trust**.
- The creed does not seek so much to define *what* God is, but **who God is**, and who we are in relationship with God (and with others through God).
- The creed is also about what version of reality we trust—especially the reality of who God is and who we are, so that we know how to understand and respond to our experiences of life.

This is why the creeds are not mere historical or intellectual exercises for church-geeks (such as me). The creeds are closely related to us because they impact who we are, and how we relate to the world around us, and to the very creator of the world. They claim not only that God exists, but that God creates us and loves us, and loves us enough to suffer and die for us and to come to us to bring us new life. This is good news for us, so we remind ourselves of this good news every week, as we stand and declare “We believe...”