

Three Creeds, One God, One Faith

The three creeds acknowledged as *ecumenical*, that is, as belonging to the whole Christian Church, are, in order of both length and detail, the *Apostles'*, the *Nicene*, and the *Athanasian*. These creeds are summaries of the faith as taught by God, through the apostles and prophets, in the Holy Scriptures. While their texts are not recorded word-for-word in the Bible, they summarize in precise and concise language what the Bible teaches about God, how he reveals himself to us so as to be believed with the faith that saves us. We do not just “believe in God.” We believe in God the Father almighty, and in his only Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. This God, three persons in one Godhead, has created us out of nothing, and still sustains us; has redeemed us from sin, death, and the devil by the death of Jesus, the Son of God, as clearly demonstrated by his glorious resurrection and ascension, “according to the Scriptures”; and sanctifies us by the faith that believes the forgiveness of sins, which comes by the Holy Spirit in the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church. The doctrine of the ecumenical creeds separates Christians from those who are not, no matter what they think of themselves. They remind us that God is as he is, and that he has precisely revealed himself to us, so as to be believed.

The creeds also provide for us a concise summary of the Gospel and its consequences—that Jesus Christ, “for us men and for our salvation,” was made man, suffered, died, was buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven. This salvation we obtain by the work of the Holy Spirit in the “holy Christian Church” which is for “the forgiveness of sins,” unto “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” Until then, we can count on God the Father, “maker of heaven and earth” to care for us in his creation, groaning as it is under the futility impressed upon it on account of our sin.

The Apostles' Creed is perhaps the oldest, virtually made up of a patchwork of passages from the New Testament. The present form is known from about 700AD, although its roots go back beyond 200AD, at least. It developed over time from an old Roman baptismal creed, which was the basis for the instruction leading to adult (or family) baptism. It is still the basis for instruction in Luther's Small Catechism. He would also have us use it as a twice-daily devotional creed (reminder of the precise Gospel, of the God who is to be trusted, waking and going to sleep and going about our work).

The Nicene Creed was written by councils of the church in two stages in 325 and 381AD, in response to false teachers who claimed that the Son of God and then the Spirit of God were not as God in the same sense the Father was. A minor addition in the 6th century was that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The Nicene Creed, because it treats in more detail the two natures of Christ, is used when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. The creed helps explain how it is possible that the body and blood of this man Jesus, present by his word in the bread and wine, forgive sins and bestow life. For ordinary flesh and blood, even, could not do this—but of God's Son, yes, indeed.

The Athanasian Creed, confessed on Trinity Sunday, treats with even greater precision the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the natures and humiliation of Christ, and salvation by faith (along with the fact that faith is to show itself in new life). It is named after Athanasius, great confessor of the Triune God, and dates from the 6th century.