

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE ECUMENICAL CREEDS

*Confessing the One True God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*



A BIBLE CLASS SERIES

*“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.”*

— Matthew 28:19

## Introduction to the Three Ecumenical Creeds

This introductory Bible class provides a broad overview of the three ecumenical creeds recognized by the historic Christian Church: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Rather than examining every phrase in detail, this study serves as a foundation for the more detailed studies that will follow in future weeks.

### What is a Creed?

The word "creed" is derived from the same Latin word that is found in other familiar words, such as *credible* and *incredible*, *credence* and *incredulous*, *credit* and *credibility*. Each of these words share the concept of *belief*. If something is said to be *incredible*, it simply means that it's *unbelievable*. When you buy something on *credit*, the institution who loaned you the money *believes* that you will pay the money back – with interest, of course.

A *creed* then is simply a statement of what a person believes. In that sense, there are all kinds of creeds. If you respond to a person asking about the location of a specific restaurant, you might say, "I believe it's across the street from the bank." That response is kind of a creed, since it communicates what you believe about the location of that restaurant.

When it comes to the Christian Church, we have all kinds of creeds, too. We talk about what we believe about creation, angels, God's Law, Baptism, and Holy Communion, to name a few. What we believe about those issues and many others is our creed in a general way. But when it comes to summaries of the Christian faith, there are three primary creeds which are called the *three ecumenical creeds*. Those three creeds are *The Apostolic Creed*, *The Nicene Creed*, and *The Athanasian Creed*.

These three creeds are called the *ecumenical* creeds because they are universally recognized within Christianity as presenting the true Christian faith. Even though there are very many Christian denominations and even more variations within each denomination, what makes any denomination truly Christian is its acceptance of the beliefs stated in these three creeds. When we claim them as our creeds, we confess what we believe. The Bible encourages such confessions when it says in Romans 10:10:

***For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.***

### Deeds, Not Creeds?

In modern times, most people tend to think little of creeds, even the three ecumenical creeds that the Christian Church has long confessed. Sadly, many Christians no longer even know about the simplest Apostolic Creed. The mantra has arisen in our day: Deeds, not creeds! In other words, they believe that what we *do* is more important than what we *say*.

That almost sounds right, doesn't it? No one wants to hang around with someone who can "talk the talk but not walk the walk." However, before we go dismissing creeds, we should consider three important points.

**Creeds Guard the Truth.** The Christian faith is all about knowing and believing the truths of God's Word. For example, the central truth of the Christian faith is that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. If we lose that truth, we can no longer be considered truly Christian.

**Creeds Anchor Our Identity.** In a world filled with competing beliefs, creeds distinguish Christianity from the pagan religions invented by people. When we confess our faith through a creed, we are declaring our allegiance to a specific understanding about God that aligns with the Bible, which is God's Word.

**Creeds Inform Our Deeds.** Without stating what is right or wrong behavior, how would one ever know that his deeds are actually worth profitable? Creeds proclaim *how* we are to love God and one another. While creeds cannot be substitutes for deeds, they go together, the one guiding us into all truth, the other being the basis of a life lived in that truth.

## The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest and simplest of the three ecumenical creeds. Its structure follows the doctrine of the Trinity by confessing the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This creed developed as a simple confession prior to being baptized. One will quickly notice that the creed presents the three persons of the one true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – along with their work regarding salvation. This is in keeping with Jesus' statement to baptize *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. The apostles did not write the Apostolic Creed, but each statement in the creed is taken from the writings of the Apostles in the New Testament.

The creed strongly emphasizes the historical reality of Christ's incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection. Statements such as 'born of the Virgin Mary' and 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' were important responses to false teachings that denied Christ's true humanity.

### Discussion Questions

- Why has the Apostles' Creed historically been associated with Baptism and catechesis? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What advantages come from having a short and memorable summary of the Christian faith? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is more detailed and doctrinally precise than the Apostles' Creed. It was written during a time of intense controversy concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. This creed follows the pattern of the Apostolic Creed but expanded on it to address an error of a man by the name of Arius, who had a significant following. His error was regarding the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Godhead. The error was that the Son is not equal to the Father and that the man Christ Jesus, was not fully divine. The Nicene Creed upholds the biblical teaching that Christ is "of one substance with the Father," emphasizing the unity and co-equality of the Trinity.

The central issue was the teaching of Arius, who claimed that the Son of God was created rather than eternal. In response, the Church confessed that the Son is 'of one substance with the Father.'

The creed also provides a fuller confession concerning the Holy Spirit and the Church. Because of its detailed Trinitarian language, it became especially associated with the Divine Service.

## Discussion Questions

- Why would the deity of Christ be essential to the doctrine of salvation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What dangers arise when the Church becomes vague concerning the identity of Christ? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# The Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed is the longest and most precise of the three ecumenical creeds. It focuses especially on the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ.

This creed, considerably longer than the other two, was named after Athanasius of Alexandria, though it was not written by him. As with the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed addressed a significant error called modalism, the idea that God only reveals himself in three different modes but is only one person. This creed also goes deeper into the full divinity of Christ and is valued as a definitive statement against any teaching that would deny this biblical truth. The central tenet of this creed can be heard in this phrase:

**The Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.**

The creed carefully guards against two opposite errors: separating Christ's divine and human natures so that He is two separate persons, or confusing them together so that He essentially has none of the attributes of His human or divine nature. For that reason, its language is often very exact and technical.

## Discussion Questions

- Why did the early Church believe theological precision was necessary? \_\_\_\_\_

- Why might the Athanasian Creed sound more technical than the Apostles' Creed? \_

## Comparison of the Three Creeds

Creed	Primary Focus	Historical Setting	Typical Use
Apostles' Creed	Basic confession of the Christian faith	Early Church Development	Catechesis and Baptism
Nicene Creed	Doctrine of the Trinity and deity of Christ	Arian controversy	Divine Service
Athanasian Creed	Trinity and two natures of Christ	Later doctrinal controversies	Trinity Sunday

## Concluding Thoughts

The ecumenical creeds remain important because they summarize biblical doctrine, guard the Church against false teaching, and unite Christians around a common confession of faith.

“What we SAY is More Important than What we DO”

Let's revisit that statement to see that it is true. When we see how important the truth is, we will then come to see that it can't be otherwise.

Imagine a groom at his wedding who dresses the part, smiles at his bride, and goes through all the motions—but when asked, “Do you take this woman to be your wife?” His words, not just his deeds, are what make the covenant real. In the same way, a church may do many good works, but without confessing the truth about God, it loses its foundation. What we say in our creeds is what defines and preserves the faith.

More importantly, though, there are some truths contained in the Bible that are not at all about what we do. In fact, the most important truth in the Bible is all about what Jesus did – for us and for our salvation. Let's face it, even when we know what we are supposed to do and not do, we still fail, every day. The Christian faith holds before us how, despite this constant failure on our part, we can be acceptable to God and inherit eternal life. That way is faith in Jesus Christ who “loved us and gave Himself for us” on the cross.

The Christian faith, while certainly addressing the Christian's behavior, isn't a work-based religion. It is a genuine faith which trusts in the works of another. So we rejoice to say: “The righteous shall live by FAITH!”