

How Early Christians Defended the Gospel

CREEDS *and* HERESIES

THEN
and
NOW



ROSE
PUBLISHING

WHERE DID THE CREEDS COME FROM?

As the gospel spread in the first centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, people wondered about the beliefs of this new religion. Like today, believers then needed quick, accessible answers to questions. Early Christians formulated simple creeds that expressed essential Christian beliefs. These creeds served at least three purposes:

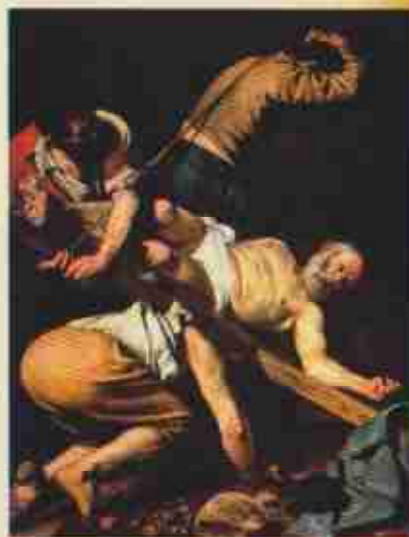
1. *Explanation of the faith.* Creeds are basic, memorable statements of belief.
2. *Training of believers.* Creeds help believers understand who they are, what they believe, and how they should act as Christians. They are like posts that delimit the boundaries of what it means to be, to believe, and live as Christians.
3. *Identification and correction of false teachings:* Even in the first century AD, false teachers abounded—teachers who claimed to follow Jesus but who promoted a message about Jesus that differed radically from the historical accounts proclaimed by apostolic eyewitnesses. Early Christian creeds helped believers to distinguish the truth about Jesus from the alternative perspectives presented by false teachers.

WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN BELIEVE?

Early Christians struggled to keep their faith rooted in the historical truth about Jesus Christ—a truth first proclaimed by apostolic eyewitnesses, then passed on through oral traditions, and recorded in the New Testament writings. By providing brief summaries of the truth about Jesus, creeds promoted unity and identity among believers in Jesus Christ.

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises to the people of Israel. For this reason, Christianity was not simply another Jewish sect like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Early Christian writings, including the earliest of the creeds, clearly reflect efforts to demonstrate that Christian faith consummated and fulfilled the Old Testament promises of a Messiah. Eventually, this radical claim led to a separation between the church and mainstream Judaism. Some Jewish religious leaders persecuted believers in Jesus. One of these religious leaders—Saul, later known as Paul—eventually trusted Jesus as his Lord and Messiah.



Caravaggio: Crucifixion of St. Peter, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome

DOCTRINE: From the Latin word *doctrina*, meaning "teaching, learning." A doctrine is a belief that a group holds as true. Christian doctrines organize and explain the beliefs the church learns from the Bible.

CREED: From the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe." Creeds are simple summaries of beliefs. They are easy to memorize and flexible to teach.

POLITICAL PERSECUTION

The early church also experienced persecution from the Roman Empire. The Romans were tolerant of other people's religions to a point; because of their respect for ancient and venerable traditions, the Romans even tolerated the Jewish religion. As persecution drove believers away from Jerusalem, it became clear that Christianity was not simply another Jewish sect, and the Romans began to demand that Christians worship the Roman emperor. Christians refused to worship the Emperor and declared that Jesus alone is Lord.

Christians' refusal to worship the Emperor was one reason for the vicious Roman persecution in the latter half of the first century. The powerful influences of pagan culture—both in the state religion of emperor worship and in the growing presence of Gnosticism (see p. 4)—made it all the more important to articulate clearly what Christians ought to believe. Identifying God as the sole Creator of all things and declaring Jesus as the only Lord became an important confession for the early church.



CONFESSING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus' life and ministry challenged Jewish expectations and hopes. The radical call to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and live a different life is not easy to digest. New Testament writers had to stretch their knowledge and understanding. These Spirit-inspired authors presented the truth about Jesus in ways that could be understood not only by Jewish people but also in the broader Greco-Roman world and beyond. The New Testament writings and the creeds of early Christianity answered some of the challenges of the Greco-Roman world.

Today, the creeds still give us identity as Christians. They tell us the following and much more:

- What does it mean to be a Christian?
- Why is it important to believe in the Trinity?
- Why is it important that Jesus is fully God and fully human?
- What unites us as believers?

The Apostle Paul emphasizes "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:2). When we recite the creeds, we agree with them; and this agreement joins us in one Lord—the God of the Bible, revealed to humanity as one God in three persons—and one faith: the confession of our common belief. The creeds identify us as the church, the called-out people of God.

CONFESSION: From the Latin word *confiteri*, meaning "acknowledge." Like creeds, confessions are an active acknowledgement of the church's faith and teachings. Often, "confessions of faith" include not only creedal declarations but also statements that summarize the unique teachings of a particular denomination or group of believers.



CREEDS IN THE BIBLE

The Bible is a confessional document. It is God's revelation of God's plans for humanity. It also includes human responses to God's revelation: praises (psalms), confessions (for example, Naaman's and Peter's in 2 Kings 5:15 and Matthew 16:16), petitions, and creeds. To treat the Bible as a confessional document means that Christians affirm (confess) its teachings as truthful. These confessions identify Christians as God's people.

BIBLE	SUMMARY	IMPORTANCE TODAY
Deuteronomy 6:4–5 <i>(Shema)</i> <i>Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.</i>	In the midst of peoples with many gods, the <i>Shema</i> sets the Israelites apart. It expresses the basic belief about the uniqueness of God.	We live in a world in which many different gods claim people's allegiance. The confession of the <i>Shema</i> sets Christians apart by their belief in the one true God.
Romans 10:9 <i>If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.</i>	This passage is a brief summary of a basic Christian belief: the confession that Jesus is Lord as a public testimony of faith.	This text declares the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus is both our one God and our Master. He has proven his divinity and power through his resurrection.
1 Corinthians 15:3–4 <i>For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures....</i>	This confession about Jesus' resurrection captures the centrality of the resurrection for the believer.	As the Apostle Paul wrote, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, our faith is in vain (15:17).

HERESY: From the Greek word *hairesis*, meaning "choice." It refers to teachings that contradict another teaching that has been accepted as the norm. Many heretics in the early church began as believers trying to understand difficult teachings about the Trinity (three persons in one perfect divine unity) and the Incarnation (the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh).

ORTHODOX: From the Greek words *ortho*, "straight," and *doxa*, "belief, opinion." Irenaeus coined the word *orthodox* to characterize his own teachings, which most other Church Fathers agreed with, and the word *heresy* to define those of his adversaries.

WHAT DOES A CHRISTIAN NOT BELIEVE?

Creeds are constant reminders of what is central to our faith. Creeds are also boundary markers that set the rules for intelligent, creative conversation about God and his creation. Like fences, creeds protect us from "heresy"—choosing to wander away from the historical testimony about the nature and workings of God found in Holy Scripture.

The creeds of the early church—the Apostolic, Nicene, Athanasian, and Chalcedonian creeds—were responses to heretical teachings. The heresies in the early church were, for the most part, related to our understanding of God and Jesus. Studying the creeds helps us understand the heresies of the past. By understanding those heresies, it is easier to avoid repeating them today.

GNOSTICISM

One ancient and important heresy that still thrives today is Gnosticism. The word *Gnosticism* is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." Gnosticism emphasized secret knowledge and secret rituals. Salvation consisted of experiencing the secret knowledge and rituals.

Ancient Gnosticism incorporated many beliefs from different religions. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, Gnostics quickly adopted some Christian practices and terminology. However, Gnosticism completely contradicts Christianity and opposes the biblical understanding of creation and God himself.

In the first two centuries AD, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Eusebius, and many others challenged specific forms of Gnosticism and wrote powerful critiques to demonstrate how Gnosticism contradicted biblical Christianity. Partly due to the Gnostic heresy, these three areas became critical for the early church to define:

- The books of the New Testament
- Salvation
- The nature and work of Jesus

TOPIC	GNOSTIC BELIEF	BIBLICAL BELIEF
Cosmogony (Origin of the universe)	A form of pantheism—a belief that identifies God with the universe. God and creation are one. The material world flows out of the divine essence. However, this god is not the God of the Bible, but a fallen god.	God created all things. The Creator and the creation are separate.
Cosmology (Nature, order, and function of the universe)	God is real, but the material world is an illusion. The material world is evil. The human soul, a remnant of the divine, is imprisoned in the body, which is part of the evil world. Humans have forgotten about their divine inner being.	The material world is as real as God. The world is not evil—God called it <i>good</i> and <i>blessed</i> it.
Origin of Evil	One dominant form of Gnosticism was based on the myth of Sophia, who lusted after the "First Father." Matter is the fruit of her sin. The physical world is evil.	Human sin originates with pride and disobedience. Creation is not evil, although it has been corrupted as a result of human sin.
Salvation	Salvation comes through experiential knowledge—a secret knowledge that teaches one how to escape the evil of a physical world. Its ultimate goal is a return to the original condition of being one with the First Father. In Christian-influenced Gnosticism, Jesus is the one teaching this secret knowledge. The knowledge of people's divine inner being is the main secret knowledge.	God is rescuing humanity through the work of Jesus, not through any special, hidden knowledge.
Jesus	Jesus is not really a human at all; he just appeared to be one. He was an <i>aeon</i> , an intermediary between the real world (the world of the spirit) and this evil reality, the material world.	He is the second person of the Trinity. He was incarnated as a real, full human, who atoned for the sins of humanity on the cross.

Gnosticism became such an influential belief system that it has continued to appear over the centuries in people's ideas about God and the world. Much of today's popular spirituality is Gnostic in its orientation.



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The Apostles did not write the Apostles' Creed. No one knows for certain when this creed was written. References to and quotation of similar statements—known as the “Rule of Faith”—can be found in writings as early as the second century AD. The name “Apostles' Creed” means that the creed contains the Apostolic tradition. The Apostles' Creed is the most universal of all the creeds. Most Christian denominations continue to recite and teach it.

Early credal statements were very helpful for new Christians in understanding their faith. These early credal statements were used in baptism. New believers memorized and studied them before being baptized. It is quite possible that from these baptismal “formulas,” the ancient church developed what we now call the Apostles' Creed.

TRADITION When contemporary Christians speak of *tradition*, they may mean a human teaching that is not found in the Bible; in this sense, traditions cannot have the same authority as the Bible.

The early church did not use the word *tradition* in this way. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Stand firm and hold to the teachings [or *traditions*] we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15). *Tradition* meant the handing down of the Apostles' teachings. For the earliest church, the Scriptures were the Old Testament books—the New Testament did not yet have a final form.

Around one hundred years after the death of Jesus, Gnostics produced many writings similar to those in our New Testament; some of those writings claimed to have apostolic authorship—these writings are called the “Gnostic Gospels.” The church realized the need to identify and make official the writings that faithfully contained the Apostles' teachings. This became urgent when the influential heretic Marcion questioned the authority of most writings that church fathers accepted.

MARCIONISM Marcion was born around AD 85 and was condemned around AD 144. Marcion rejected the Old Testament. He taught that the God of the Old Testament was angry and vengeful. He taught that the Old Testament God had nothing to do with the God of the New Testament, who is loving and forgiving. Marcion even threw out all writings that agreed, quoted, or referenced the Old Testament! Marcion rejected the Epistle of James and all the other books except Luke and the Pauline epistles. Marcion had rejected the full Apostolic teaching, so the church rejected Marcion's teachings.

APOSTLES' CREED	SUMMARY OF MEANING
I believe in... (Isa. 44:6)	The basic meaning of <i>creed</i> . It expresses the beliefs that unite all Christians. The words that follow preserve the teaching of the Apostles.
God, the Father Almighty (Isa. 44:6)	Not just belief in an impersonal force or in many gods, but rather, a deep trust in a personal, caring, loving God.
Maker of heaven and earth. (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1)	God is powerful. Just as God created the universe, God can heal, save, guard, comfort, and guide us. The whole universe is his.
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, (John 9:38; 20:28)	We believe Jesus is the promised Messiah. Believing in God is also believing in Jesus.
Our Lord; (Phil. 2:9-11)	No nation, no king, no Caesar comes first: only Jesus is Lord. He has all authority and power; only he deserves praise and worship.
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary; (Luke 1:35)	Jesus' birth and life were a miracle. By being fully human, Jesus has given us an example of life, taken upon himself the penalty of sin, and given us a new life and a new future.
Suffered under Pontius Pilate, (Luke 23:23-25)	Many have blamed Jews for Jesus' death. The Creed makes it clear that Pilate decided Jesus' death. Jesus died an innocent man. Pilate's injustice contrasts with God's justice; Pilate's arrogance contrasts with Jesus' humility.
Was crucified, died, and buried (1 Cor. 15:3-4)	These events really happened. Jesus' crucifixion and death were not merely staged; Jesus' death was real and a sad necessity for our sake.
He descended into hell; (1 Peter 3:18-19)	The meaning of this line is not clear; some think it refers to 1 Peter 3:19: "He went and preached to the spirits in prison." It is also possible to translate this line as "he descended to the dead," emphasizing the reality of Jesus' death. The phrase was not in the oldest available copy of the creed.
On the third day he rose from the dead; (1 Cor. 15:4)	Jesus' resurrection is fundamental. His resurrection points to the fulfillment of all justice and the hope for all believers. Jesus is the "firstborn from among the dead" (Col. 1:18).
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; (Luke 24:51)	Ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father demonstrate Jesus' authority over the whole creation.
From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead. (2 Tim. 4:1; John 5:22)	Jesus' second coming will not be like a humble lamb. He will return like a triumphant king and judge. With his authority, he will judge all of creation. Christians rest assured that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).
I believe in the Holy Spirit, (John 15:26; 16:7-14)	Jesus promised to send us a comforter, guide, equipper, and advocate. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in our midst.
The holy catholic church, (Gal. 3:26-29)	God has called his people out of sin and death; it is a group separated (holy) and from the whole world and throughout all time (catholic, or universal). The church is a people bought with the precious blood of Jesus on the cross.
The communion of saints, (Heb. 10:25)	In Jesus, all believers from all places and all times are brothers and sisters; we all share the same fellowship, the same Spirit, and the same Lord. We, who were many, are now one people in Jesus.
The forgiveness of sins, (Heb. 8:12; Luke 7:48)	Sin had broken our relationship with God, with creation, and with one another. Jesus has reconciled us with God, freeing us from our sin and death.
The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. (1 Thess. 4:16; John 10:28)	Unlike the Gnostics who viewed every physical reality as evil, Christians believe that they will receive new bodies and a new creation. Jesus' resurrected body was real (he could eat and could be touched); our resurrection bodies will also have a physical nature. And we will live with Jesus forever in a new creation.



WHY DO THE CREEDS MATTER?

1. ***Creeds help Christians to distinguish between essential and nonessential beliefs.*** Not everyone who disagrees with you is a heretic! There are some beliefs on which Christians cannot compromise. On others, we can agree to disagree. The creeds—which focus on the essential beliefs that cannot be compromised—help us to distinguish between essential and nonessential beliefs.

2. ***Creeds help Christians to focus their faith and worship on the issues that matter most.*** The issues that the creeds emphasize—such as the Trinity, the character of God, the nature of Jesus, and the resurrection, for example—are the ones that the earliest Christians understood to matter most. These same beliefs can provide a unifying focus for contemporary Christians' teaching and worship.

3. ***Creeds help Christians to articulate clearly how their beliefs differ from other teachings.*** The apostle Peter commanded his readers always "to be ready to provide to anyone who asks a defense for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15-16). When it comes to giving a defense for our faith, the creeds are crucial! When someone asks what Christians believe about the resurrection of Jesus, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds provide concise summaries of this core doctrine. When a child in Sunday school asks why Jesus came to earth, a teacher who remembers the Nicene Creed can tell the child immediately, "It was for us and for our salvation." If someone asks whether the virgin conception of Jesus really matters, the Christian who knows the creeds can immediately recall that, even for the earliest believers in Jesus, this was an essential doctrine.

HERESIES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

HERESY	SUMMARY	COMMENTS
DOCETISM First Century	This heresy denies the reality of Jesus' human nature. Jesus only <i>appeared</i> to be human. (The word <i>docetism</i> is derived from a Greek word meaning "appearance.") Docetism was imported directly from Gnosticism into Christianity.	Today many people deny Jesus' divinity and consider him <i>just</i> a human. But Christians who focus only on Jesus' divinity and ignore the physical reality of Jesus' resurrection fall into a mild form of docetism.
EBIONITISM First Century	Ebionites denied Jesus' divinity and proposed the full continuity of the Old Testament Law. In other words, Christians should still submit to the Old Testament Law. Ebionites rejected Paul's teachings.	This heresy is significant because it prompted the church to define itself as distinct from Judaism, though still connected to the Old Testament.
ADOPTIONISM Second Century	Adoptionism claims that Jesus was born as (only) a human. Later, he became divine when God <i>adopted</i> him. This common position among Gnostics is a form of <i>Monarchianism</i> .	The Bible clearly shows that Jesus <i>is</i> God. Adoptionism arises from a misplaced respect for God's uniqueness. The idea that God became human is very difficult to understand. Today, some scholars still teach adoptionism as a way to understand Jesus as a human being who became divine in a <i>metaphorical way</i> .
MANICHEANISM Second Century	A heresy fusing Christian, Zoroastrian and Buddhist beliefs in a religion that was very popular and widespread until around the AD 600's. Mani called himself the <i>Paraclete</i> who would complete the work of people like Zoroaster, Plato, Buddha, and Jesus.	Manicheanism is important because it spread Gnosticism in the West and in Christianity (Augustine was a Manichean before becoming a Christian). Mani did not believe in a personal God; good and evil were equal but opposing forces.
MARCIONISM Second Century	Marcion made a radical break between Christianity and the Old Testament. Marcion proclaimed himself a follower of Jesus but rejected Paul's writings and anything that sounded like the Old Testament.	Today, many Christians who ignore the Old Testament are functional Marcionites. Whatever our doctrinal differences may be, the church confesses that the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God.
MODALISM Second Century	Modalism teaches that God takes on different modes of being at different times. In the Old testament God manifested himself as the Father. In the New Testament, God manifested himself as the Son. In the Church age, God manifests himself as the Holy Spirit.	Modalism attempts to make sense of the difficult doctrine of the Trinity. However, it is inconsistent with biblical testimony. Some people today continue to hold to a form of modalism. Though they identify themselves as Christians, they understand God in modalist terms.



HERESY	SUMMARY	COMMENTS
<p>MONTANISM Second/Third Century</p>	<p>Montanists emphasized the spiritual gift of prophecy. Montanus, the founder, believed he received direct revelation from God through the Holy Spirit. Church fathers were divided concerning his teachings. However, Montanus's followers were more radical, claiming their prophecies were superior to the Bible. They also identified their three leaders with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The church condemned their teachings and their legalistic way of life.</p>	<p>This heresy reminds us of the importance of the Holy Spirit. It also warns us of the excesses of some prophetic claims. Some Christians believe the Holy Spirit continues to give the gift of prophecy in our times. However, such prophecy must depend on biblical revelation to be valid.</p>
<p>APOLLINARIANISM Fourth Century</p>	<p>The idea that Jesus had a full human body and soul, but no human reason. Instead, the divine <i>logos</i> was Jesus' rationality. Apollinaris, Bishop of Laodicea, could not understand the union of two very different natures, human and divine. He attempted to preserve the divine glory by separating the human and the divine.</p>	<p>This view is based on a semi-Gnostic understanding of reality: the "soul" is good; the "material world" is bad. A rejection of the world as God's good creation can lead one to this position.</p>
<p>ARIANISM Fourth Century</p>	<p>Arianism argues that Jesus does not share the same <i>essence</i> with God, and thus does not share in the same divine nature with eternity and authority. The Nicene, Chalcedonian, and Athanasian Creeds are primarily responses to this heresy.</p>	<p>This heresy prompted the church to define its understanding of Christ. The question of Jesus' nature, divine or not, is directly related to his work of salvation.</p>
<p>MACEDONIANISM Fourth Century</p>	<p>A heresy similar to Arianism, also denying that Jesus is the same essence of God the Father, although affirming Jesus as eternal. In addition, believers denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.</p>	<p>Despite the strong condemnation from the Nicaea Council, the rise of this heresy shows the extension and powerful effect of the Arian heresy in Christianity. It extended the doubts from the nature of Jesus to the nature of the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>PELAGIANISM Fourth Century</p>	<p>Pelagius taught that sin had not affected human nature at all. Adam's sin set a "bad example," which people choose to follow or not. Christ came to offer a "good example" of life. Salvation means choosing to follow Jesus' example.</p>	<p>Pelagianism represents a conscious rejection of God's grace-filled action to save humans and reconcile people with himself. A milder form, called semi-Pelagianism, suggests that we cooperate with God for our justification.</p>
<p>NESTORIANISM Fifth Century</p>	<p>Nestorius attempted to explain Jesus' incarnation by suggesting that Jesus has two separate natures: a human and a divine nature. However, the separation is so extreme that it would appear that Jesus had both two natures and two persons: a divine nature for one "person" and a human one for another "person."</p>	<p>Nestorianism was a reaction to the teaching that Jesus had only one nature (Apollinarianism is an example of this teaching). This teaching caused a great split in Christianity.</p>

THE NICENE CREED

The greatest doctrinal challenge to the church arose internally. Arius, a priest in Alexandria, suggested that if God begat Jesus, then Jesus had an origin. As such, Jesus did not share in the same divine essence with the Father. Therefore, Jesus was a lesser god.

In AD 325, Constantine called the leaders of the church to participate in a council—that is, an assembly of bishops. They met in the city of Nicaea, in present-day Turkey. The Council of Nicaea, made up of about 300 participants, overwhelmingly voted against the Arian teachings—ancient documents suggest that only three bishops refused to sign their agreement. The council expressed its views about God, Jesus, and the church in the Nicene Creed.

NICENE CREED

MEANING

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

As in the Apostles' Creed, the foundation of the Christian faith is the uniqueness of God. He alone is God. The Father is a distinct person, or individual reality, within the Godhead. In addition, God created *all* things. He is not created, but the Creator.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

The creed affirms Jesus'

- Lordship: The same title applied to God the Father in the Old Testament.
- Equality: Jesus is as much God as the Father. They share the same *divine essence*. Thus, Jesus is eternal.
- Distinctness: Although they share the same essence, Jesus is a *person* distinct from the Father.

Who for us, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

The creed emphasizes both Jesus' divinity and humanity.

- The image of coming down from heaven shows his divinity.
- His miraculous virgin birth shows his humanity.
- His suffering and death on the cross, again, show his full humanity.
- His resurrection and ascension show his perfect work of salvation on behalf of humanity.
- His final judgment shows his authority over the whole creation.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets,

The creed confirms the Bible's doctrine of the Trinity: The Holy Spirit is fully divine, of the same *essence* as the Father and the Son, and is a distinct person within the Godhead.

In the sixth century, Western churches added "who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." It is this last addition, known as the *filioque* (Latin for "and the Son") that has caused division and conflict between the Eastern Orthodox and Western churches.

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

One of the main purposes of the creed was to promote the unity of all believers in one universal church within the Apostolic tradition. Baptism represents this unity, as does the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection, and the world to come. These are all promises and hopes that link all Christians everywhere and at every time.

[NOTE: The words in italics were added after the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The Council of Constantinople made these additions in AD 381.]

A CHRISTIAN EMPIRE In AD 313, Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. His Edict of Milan, put into effect in 313, granted full tolerance to all religions of the Empire. Constantine fought hard to gain stability for the Empire. Scholars have debated much whether Constantine really converted to Christianity—and if so, at what age he did. Whatever the case, Constantine became the protector and, in time, promoter of Christianity throughout the Empire.

During Constantine's reign, the Arian controversy threatened to divide Christianity and bring chaos to the Empire. Constantine understood that a divided Christianity would also divide the Empire. To keep his Empire together, he needed to keep Christianity together. From a political standpoint, the Nicaea Council solved and prevented a schism in Christianity and the Roman Empire.

COMMENTS

In Gnosticism, the God of the Bible is just the *demiurge*, an evil god who brought about the material world. This god is himself created.

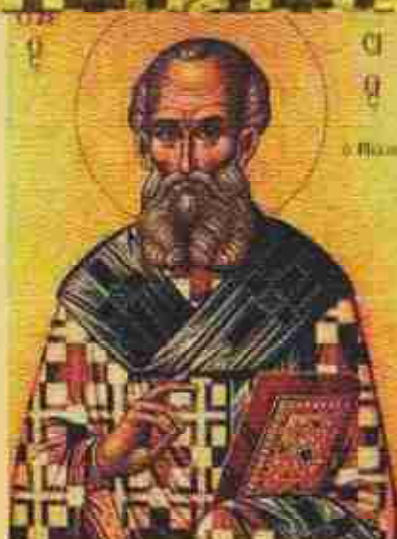
In the New Testament, Jesus' Lordship is directly connected to his divinity. He is not Lord simply because he earned it; rather, he is Lord because he is God. Arius tried to understand the Incarnation, but his approach ignores the broad context of the Scriptures.

Heresies about Jesus denied either his full divinity or his full humanity.

- Denying Jesus' divinity removes his ability to save humanity from sin and death. Jesus is reduced to being a *model* of perfection.
- Denying Jesus' humanity removes his ability to intercede and represent humanity in his death.

The natural consequence of denying Jesus' divinity is that the Holy Spirit is not divine either. After the creed of AD 325, the heresy about the Holy Spirit arose as a follow-up to Arianism.

The Arian controversy threatened to split the young and growing church. The creed allows the possibility of unity of belief and practice. The word *catholic* means "universal," in the sense of the whole world. It refers, then, to the worldwide fellowship of all believers.



ATHANASIUS AND THE TRINITY

Athanasius was one of the most active opponents of Arius' teachings. His persistence and clear mind helped the church to clarify its positions and write it in a creed, the Nicene Creed.

Athanasius' teachings are summarized in the Athanasian Creed. While it is likely that Athanasius did not write it, the creed contains his teachings and main ideas. The Athanasian Creed begins by affirming, "This is what the catholic [or universal] faith teaches: we worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity. We distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance [or essence]." After unpacking these ideas, the creed concludes, "So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped."



Map of Constantinople (Istanbul), printed in 1572 © History Group

Understanding the incarnation of Jesus—the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh—was one of the greatest challenges for the early church. In AD 451 the Council of Chalcedon (located in today's Turkey) provided a clear statement of the Apostolic teachings concerning Jesus. The Chalcedonian Creed made it clear that Jesus is fully God and fully human, two natures existing in perfect harmony in one person.

HERESIES TODAY

Many heresies—wrong beliefs—relate to two central biblical teachings: the Trinity and the Incarnation. Misunderstanding who God is will lead to misunderstanding what God has done and will do. Knowing the basic teachings of the church will help us identify and respond to heresies still existing today. The following chart provides some basic points to keep in mind about how ancient heresies show up today and what the correct, biblical teachings are.



ANCIENT HERESY

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE TODAY

GNOSTICISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusing God with his creation. Taking things and people as part of the divine. • Rejecting the physical world as evil. • Belief that salvation is inside every person. • Speaking about Jesus as a guru or only as a great teacher. • "Pop spirituality" based on Gnostic ideas. <i>The Secret</i>, <i>The Power of Now</i>, and many self-help teachings fall into this category.
MARCIONISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejecting the Old Testament. • Rejecting anything that sounds too Jewish from the New Testament. • Completely divorcing the Old Testament from the New Testament.
MONARCHIANISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denying the Trinity. • Claiming one god with three functions: First appearing as Father, then as Son, and now as Holy Spirit. • Both forms are active: Adoptionism and Modalism.
ARIANISM APOLLINARIANISM DOCETISM MACEDONIANISM NESTORIANISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims that Jesus was human only and became divine. • Claims that Jesus was only divine and merely appeared human. • Claims that Jesus was two persons with two natures in one being.
MONTANISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering prophecy beyond what the Bible reveals. • Claiming greater authority than the Bible. • Making the Holy Spirit more important than Jesus. • Using prophetic gifts to abuse other Christians' trust and faith. • Misleading people through unverifiable prophecies.

HERESIES ABOUT CHRIST CORRECTED IN THE CHALCEDONIAN CREED

SUBJECT	HERETICAL POSITION	APOSTOLIC TEACHING
Nature of Christ	<p>Arianism: Jesus was the first created being, similar to God, but not fully divine like the Father.</p> <p>Docetism: Jesus was only a divine being. He merely <i>appeared</i> human.</p>	Christ is <i>fully</i> God and <i>fully</i> human.
Relationship of Christ's Two Natures	<p>Nestorianism: No connection between Jesus' two natures. Practically, Jesus had two natures and was two persons.</p> <p>Eutychianism: The divine and human natures are fused into one nature.</p>	Two natures, divine and human, and one person.

CORRECT APOSTOLIC TEACHING

COMMENTS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is the Creator of all things. • The world is good, though corrupted through human sin. • Salvation is possible only through Jesus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christians need to be careful not to reject this material world. Radical separation of the body and soul is not a biblical teaching. God loves the world he made. He blessed it. We should do likewise.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Old and New Testaments together are the Word of God. • Some ideas and concepts in the Old Testament continued in the New. Others Jesus fulfilled and are no longer binding in the New Testament. • God reveals himself in both Testaments. But Jesus is the fullness of God's revelation to humanity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes Christians make too strong a distinction between the Law and the Gospel. • The New Testament revelation is more complete than the Old Testament revelation because of Jesus (Heb. 1:1-3). • The revelation of the New Testament depends on God's works and words in the Old Testament.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is one God in three distinct Persons: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. • All three persons participate in the divine nature but have distinct personalities. • All three are involved in God's work of Creation, redemption, and restoration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some groups believe that only Jesus (of the three members of the Trinity) is God. This is a form of modalism. • Other groups, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, confess a form of adoptionism. They deny that Jesus is fully God. Rather, they may believe Jesus is an angel, a special divine being, but not God.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity. • He is fully God and fully human. • He is one person with two natures, divine and human. The natures are joined, but not mixed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons show clear examples of such errors. • It is possible to emphasize Jesus' divine character to the point of forgetting that he is fully human as well. Jesus suffered, was hungry, and was tempted like any other human.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has revealed his will in the Scriptures and in Jesus. • The Holy Spirit only testifies about Jesus. • Although there are gifts of prophecy, prophecies are still subject to the authority of the Bible. • Prophecies from God are for building up the church, not for personal gain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most founders of current cults—like Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science—have claimed to receive new revelations from God. • These revelations contradict the Bible. • The prophetic claims of groups like Heaven's Gate, Peoples Temple, and many others have had tragic consequences.