

The Top 13 Christian Creeds: Origins, Contents, & Importance

Theology / by Paige Deane <https://justdisciple.com/christian-creed/>

[there are slight modifications, hopefully for clarity]

If someone asked you, “what do Christians believe?” how would you respond? If you are drawing a blank right now, you may want to consider writing or learning a creed.

What is a Christian creed? **A Christian creed is a series of defining statements that express the core beliefs of Christians. They are the objective truths that all Christians believe. Originally, new Christians would study to develop their own creed based on what they had learned about their new faith. However, over time, several specific creeds came to prominence and were used by many people as a confession of faith prior to being baptized. Today, these creeds remain as declarations of faith for Christians around the world.**

[Mine - I would note a difference between a CREED and a CONFESSION. CREEDS are broad and limited whereas CONFESSIONS are more specific and topically expanded]

Of the many creeds that have been written over the years, thirteen have risen above the rest to become anthems of the Christian faith, and in this post, we will discover what sets these apart from the rest.

[ANTE-NICENE FATHERS {PRE-400AD}]

1. The Apostles Creed

Despite its name, the Apostles Creed was not written by the apostles as many people once thought. It was once believed that each apostle contributed a line to this creed, however, this has since been proved a myth, and there is, in fact, no evidence to suggest it was written by the apostles at all.

In reality, this creed is a variant of the Old Roman Creed, **an ancient baptismal confession** that existed long before the Apostles Creed was developed.

Since its creation, it has become one of the most dominant Christian Creeds and is used in a variety of baptismal rites and Reformation catechisms (a summary of doctrine used to teach) to describe the core tenets of Christianity.

Like other Christian Creeds, the Apostles Creed serves to affirm **the core tenets** of the Christian faith, God the creator, Jesus his Son, born to a virgin and later crucified, then resurrected to join his Father and ready to bring judgment, the Holy Spirit, the church, communion, forgiveness, resurrection, and everlasting life. All these are communicated through this creed.

Despite its position as one of the most prominent Christian Creeds, there remains some confusion and controversy over two of its lines.

It is important to note that in line 14 “catholic” refers, not to the Roman Catholic Church, but to the Church as a whole, a more general term than the context to which it is normally applied today. As a result, some elect to say “the holy Christian Church” to eliminate confusion.

Another line that remains controversial is line 8, “he descended to the dead.” This line is often backed up with 1 Peter 3:19, however, this requires a lot of assumptions to be made about the text. As a result, many elect to simply omit the line entirely instead of trying to justify it with assumptions.

2. The Nicene Creed

Unlike the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed was **developed in response to several heresies** that were gaining traction at the time, particularly Arianism. This heresy favored the depiction of God’s unity over his existence as part of the Trinity.

They claimed that because God was so unique, that Jesus could not have existed self-sufficiently and therefore Jesus was created by God.

The Nicene Creed was developed to combat this heresy by emphasizing the elements of the trinity, and Jesus’ status as part of the Godhead.

Various alterations have been made to the creed since its creation in A.D. 325 such as the addition of what has become known as the “Filioque” (noted in brackets).

This phrase adds further emphasis to the concept of the Trinity and one of the last notable alterations added in A.D. 589.

The Nicene Creed provided an important distinction for the people of its time that has lasted through the years.

By emphasizing the status of each member of the Trinity as part of the Godhead it set itself apart from the prominent heresies of the time.

Creeds have a way of making people choose. Choose whether they believe what they are saying or not.

The creation of this creed and others like it created a choice, eliminating the middle ground, and helping people to distinguish between all the differing interpretations at the time.

3. The Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed was birthed out of the same heresies that birthed the Nicene Creed, namely the heresy of Arianism. Although he didn’t write it, the Creed was named after Athanasius who lived from A.D. 293-373.

Athanasius was known for his commitment to Christian Orthodoxy and the doctrine of the Trinity despite the Arian ideas that were being perpetuated.

As a result of these circumstances, both the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were born. And like the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed strives to emphasize the nature of the Trinity.

The first half is devoted to this subject, while the second half is devoted to the two part nature of Jesus.

This creed was designed to explain clearly the doctrine of these interconnected during a time when heresy was perpetuating confusion on the subject.

It should also be noted that, similar to the Apostles Creed, the word “catholic” is not referring to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it refers to Christianity as a whole. It is a general term that encompasses Christianity, Christians, and the Christian Church.

The Athanasian Creed was incredibly valuable to the people of that time. It went deeper than the Nicene Creed and truly outlined what Christians believe, emphasizing the doctrine of the Trinity, and the nature of Jesus Christ.

It provided an outline of core beliefs for people in a time when heresy was running rampant and allowing confusion to lead believers astray.

4. The Chalcedonian Definition

The Chalcedonian Definition was developed in response to the same events as the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, however, its focus is most similar to the second half of the Athanasian Creed which basically addresses the same problem from a different angle.

Essentially, this creed attacks the second half of the problem. The Arians believed that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were not equal with God as part of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed and the first half of the Athanasian Creed confirm that they are all equally apart of the Godhead and the Trinity.

However, the Chalcedonian Definition and the second half of the Athanasian Creed confront the other side of the problem – the dual nature of Christ.

This creed’s primary goal is to assert that Jesus was one being with two natures, the nature of man, and the nature of God. This is what allowed him to be God, yet present himself on earth as a man.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God

and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin;

begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly,

unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union,

but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten,

God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Just like the Athanasian and Nicene creeds, the Chalcedonian Definition helped believers to make a choice. It outlined the natures of Christ in a way that they could understand and helped believers, when they had made their choice, to stand by it by giving them something concrete to stand by.

5. Didache

The Didache, or “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” is a document that originated in the early church and has a creed-like nature describing fundamental components and instructions for Christians.

The document appears to be compiled of several sources and edited over time, however, there is no real consensus regarding the date the document was compiled.

This document was an important resource for early Christians both as a creed of what they believed, and also as a set of instructions for various religious practices such as baptism and fasting.

The document is arranged into four parts, each with a different topic and purpose that contributed to the whole.

The first part provides instructions on morality for new Christians as they were learning about their new faith in preparation to be baptized. It outlined the contrasting “way of life” and the “way of death,” such as was also contrasted in the Bible.

The second part outlines more ritual instructions. This included things like fasting, communion, and baptism as a sort of introductory manual for liturgical practices and spiritual disciplines.

The third part then serves as instructions for religious leaders, followed by the fourth and final part which focuses on beliefs about the end times.

Ultimately this document served as sort of introductory crash course on Christianity for new believers in the early church. It familiarized them with the fundamental beliefs of Christians as well as common practices like fasting.

Despite its age, it is valuable to us today as well, for while expressions of Christianity have changed over time, its core values have remained the same, allowing documents like these to last through the ages.

6. The Baptismal Creed of Jerusalem

The Baptismal Creed of Jerusalem was a sort of precursor to many other creeds that would follow and is also considered the template for most baptismal confessions. It has been used for centuries as an abbreviated creed confessed before baptism and its basic formula is still utilized today.

This creed was developed as a result of the same heresies that brought about the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, and most strongly resembles the opener of the Apostles Creed.

I believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost, and in one baptism of repentance.

The Baptismal Creed of Jerusalem

This is perhaps even more commonplace today than the Apostles Creed, although many don't realize that this is what they are hearing. This creed has truly stood the test of time and has become the heart cry of Christians worldwide, which we celebrate during baptism.

[1500+]

7. The Westminster Confession of Faith

The Westminster Confession of Faith came about due to conflict in the Church of England. At the time, they were hoping to unify everyone under the English Protestant Church. This included Scotland which was largely Presbyterian at the time.

This document was intended to lay out a baseline for Christianity in England that would unify the church. It detailed what they believed about a variety of topics, most notably their view on Scripture and their affirmation of Calvin's view of predestination among other things.

The development was a rough process with the King coming in and out of power and the Scots refusing some of the practices that the King was trying to enforce upon them.

While it never met its original goal, in the end, the Westminster Confession had a lasting impact and would become a foundational piece of Christianity in Scotland moving forward.

8. The London Baptist Confession of Faith

Although the London Baptist Confession of Faith came out in its fullest form in 1689, the events that sparked its creation began more than fifty years prior. This confession grew out of the persecution of the baptist church by the Church of England and out of the rise of Arminian theology.

At this time, two groups of baptists emerged, the general baptists, and the particular baptists (also known as reformed baptists, or calvinistic baptists).

[The Particular Baptists adhered to the doctrine of a particular atonement—that Christ died only for an elect—and were strongly Calvinist (following the Reformation teachings of John Calvin) in orientation; the General

Baptists held to the doctrine of a general atonement—that Christ died for all people and not only for an elect—and represented the more moderate Calvinism of Jacobus Arminius, a 17th-century Dutch theologian. The London Baptist Confession of faith was the final product of refining the next forty-five years of confessions intended to specify what the particular baptists believed.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baptist/History#ref466518>]

This document would become instrumental in the continued development of the reformed baptist church and the baptist church in the Americas, holding value that would last for many years to come.

9. The Augsburg Confession of Faith

War dominated the mind of Roman Emperor Charles V throughout the 1520s. However, when some sense of peace came around, he finally turned his attention back towards the various religious movements gaining traction at the time.

In an effort to resolve some of the perceived religious problems, he called an assembly together to find a solution.

It was at this assembly the Augsburg Confession of Faith was born. Here, **Philip Melancthon** presented twenty-eight articles, twenty-one presenting the tenets of the Lutheran Christian Faith, and seven proposing ways to reform various aspects of the Church.

This document was presented by Melancthon for the entire assembly, including the emperor, with support from Martin Luther who was unable to attend but helped to develop and revise the document.

It made special efforts to prove that their view was not, in fact, contrary to the Bible as many believed at the time, but instead, their way was an attempt at restoring what was once done in the early church.

This document was very important to its time as it was a long needed effort at united The Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church. It had a huge influence on the results of the assembly, much to the King's disapproval, and would continue to influence The Lutheran Church through present day.

10. Cannons of Dort [in response to the five points of the Remonstrance]

The historical European Christian Church, as you have seen so far, has produced many confessions and creeds in response to heresy and persecution across the centuries. Another such document was the Cannons of Dort.

These cannons were an attempt at unifying reformed churches in Germany. The assembly was comprised of a diverse group of reformed church leaders from across Europe who would come together to write the Cannon.

The cannon isn't particularly well known today, however, it's condensed version, the five points of Calvinism, is alive and well.

This document outlined these five points in such a way that the reformed churches of the era could rally by it and use it as a standard for their churches, which would have a lasting effect across the globe for centuries down the road.

[1900+]

11. Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy [1978]

It is important to note that not all of these creeds, confessions, and statements of faith are ancient documents from hundreds of years ago. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was developed in 1978, and has proved extraordinarily valuable ever since.

This statement was developed in response to a growing departure from the belief in Biblical inerrancy in the church which cropped up in the 60's. The statement was drafted at a conference by a group of 268 participants representing various denominations, seminaries, colleges, and churches across the nation.

The result was a unified stance on the subject that would set the standard for years to come.

The statement approached the issue from two angles, first asserting the divine inspiration of Scripture by God, then the inerrancy of Scripture based on its divine inspiration.

In the end, part of the miracle of this document was the fact ultimately, this group was able to unite and stand together on something, remaining a positive example to the leaders of today as we walk out our own faith.

12. Nashville Statement [2017]

On an even more recent note, the Nashville Statement was drafted in 2017 with the purpose of **expressing the evangelical Christian's stance on matters of gender and sexuality** which have come to the forefront of today's conversations.

Recent years have brought with them a push to support homosexuality and the adoption of a gender you were not born into. In an effort to be "loving to all" some churches began to condone these practices which the Bible describes as sinful.

The Nashville Statement was created as a means of outlining what Scripture says on these topics and asserting that the Christian Church does not support these practices.

Due to its recent creation we have not yet seen the full effect this document will have on this generation, however, it has, like other creeds and confessions, given people the choice. It has made clear the stance of the evangelical Christian and will help the church to remain true to the Word of God for years to come.

13. Biblical Creeds [See Further ROOTS compiled by Patrick J. Griffiths]

Ultimately, the more important creeds come from the Word of God itself. Throughout the Bible, but particularly the New Testament, we see examples of people confessing and declaring exactly what they believed. Paul in Philippians says:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11 ESV

Even Jesus proclaimed the truth of who he was and the good news of the Kingdom.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6 ESV

If we see the great men of faith like Paul and Peter, confessing what they believe, how important is it then for us to also be aware of and proclaim what we believe?

Some dismiss creeds as old liturgical practices that no longer apply. However, I would encourage you to take a second look and recognize how valuable they are. As I said before, creeds encourage people to make a choice about what they believe.

So, I implore you, don't live in ignorance or indecision. Read through the creeds and confessions above, or study the Word and write your own. The point isn't that you wake up and recite the Apostles Creed every morning, the point is that you have a firm understanding of what you believe and live it out.

Move on from indecision and ignorance and take responsibility for the truth of what you believe.