



The Creeds — for the hungry and the curious

Celebrating the Nicene Creed in 2025, giving thanks for the Word, and the words that unite us with one another

Introduction

This is an exciting year for the Church worldwide. Seventeen hundred years ago, in 325CE, the diverse groups of Christians who had developed after the death and resurrection of Jesus came together at the Council of Nicaea and, miraculously, agreed a common formula: the Nicene Creed.

It wasn't achieved without the violence that Christians often employ with those of differing views: St Nicholas reputedly punched Arius for denying Jesus's divinity. Nor was it the end of theological arguments. The infamous *filioque* clause, stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds 'from the Father *and the Son*', divided the Western and Eastern Churches for centuries. Creeds themselves became focuses for the human tendency to quarrel over words and concepts.

But still – the Council of Nicaea produced this remarkable form of words that most Churches repeat at their services of Holy Communion. Its constant repetition makes it a uniting force rather than a dividing one – but also, perhaps, allows us sometimes to overlook its remarkable achievement in expressing the mystery of the Trinity: that God is One, knowable in diverse ways encompassing a mutual, loving indwelling of wills. Within Godself, there is humanity, and humanity derives its beauty, creativity, and loving purpose from God.

It is a joy that many of the historical barriers between different branches of the Christian Church have been breaking down in recent decades, and that we can nowadays

worship together equally and appreciate the gifts that each Church has developed differently over centuries of separation. One of the many fallings out was over the dating of Easter. This one still hasn't been solved, but, by grace or coincident, this 1700th anniversary year of the Nicene Creed is one when Eastern and Western Churches will celebrate Easter on the same day: 20 April. Alleluia!

Why do Christians need creeds?

In a predominantly oral culture, the recitation of creeds allowed teachings to be learned and shared. From the time of the Early Church, candidates preparing for baptism would learn the creeds by heart. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct early creeds from the catechetical lectures of St Cyril of Jerusalem (315-86).

Also, the earliest Christians were still discerning which writings were authentic and which ones were heretical distortions of beliefs, or later additions or omissions. Bishops and priests would appeal to what they called the 'Rule of Faith' to distinguish truth from error. (See Book I, Chapter 10 of *Against Heresies* by St. Irenaeus c. 130-200).

The Three Trinitarian Creeds used in the Church of England

The Apostles' Creed is recited at Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Nicene Creed is part of the service of Holy Communion. The Athanasian Creed is indicated instead of the Apostles' Creed on 14 occasions during the liturgical year (including Christmas Day, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday). *Common Worship* contains a shortened, responsive version of the Athanasian Creed for those who cannot quite make it through the original.

The Apostles' Creed was thought to summarise what the apostles believed. It is hinted at in letters dating from the very early 300s and its origin is the baptismal creed of Rome called the 'Roman Symbol'. St Ambrose (339-397) and St Augustine (354-430) urged their people to recite daily the 'Symbol of Faith'. Most scholars date it from the 400s, but it did not become popular until the eighth century.

It introduces the phrase: 'He descended into Hell', a belief developed in the First Epistle of Peter: 'For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison.' 1 Peter 3:18-19

Hell can translate *Hades*, which is the place where the just who died before Christ went as they awaited redemption or *Gehenna* - the final punishment for the damned.

The Apostles' Creed also mentions 'the Communion of the Saints'. We are not called to a solitary personal relationship with God: we're called to love and cherish our fellow Christians as partners, parents and children. This is 'the communion of the saints' – meaning that God's salvation/wholeness is mediated to us and also through us.

The Athanasian Creed begins very differently: 'Whosoever wishes to be saved' – which gives it its alternative Latin title '*Quicumque Vult*' – must 'hold the catholic faith'. It is the

longest of the three creeds, and emphasises (rather repetitiously) the equality and divinity of all three persons of the Trinity. It was most likely composed in the late 400s or early 500s, and was later wrongly attributed to St Athanasius, one of the theologians involved in the Nicene Council.

The Nicene Creed

At the heart of the Nicene Creed is the confession of Jesus Christ is 'of the same substance' as the Father.

The first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 was called in response to the heresy of Arianism. What was at stake was whether or not God was really incarnated as 'Emmanuel' – God with us. Arius, a priest in Alexandria, read John 3.16, which refers to the Son of God as 'begotten', and Colossians 1.15 which refers to Christ as the 'firstborn of creation'. He concluded that Jesus was not fully divine. His argument ran:

- What distinguishes God from creation is eternity;
- The Bible describes the Son as 'begotten' and 'the firstborn';
- To be 'begotten' or 'born' means to come into existence at a point in time;
- Therefore, the Son is not God.

Arius did think that Jesus had as much divinity as a created being *could* have, but that Jesus was, nevertheless, one of us created beings, not God. God first created the Son and then the Son created the rest of creation.

Further in the background to this controversy was the Church's problem with Gnosticism – not one set of beliefs but a range of beliefs derived from Hebrew scripture and Greek philosophy and religion, in varying proportions. Some Gnostics believed that the cosmos consisted of a series of de-gradations of divinity. Divinity is pure spirit and knowledge. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the material world, our world. Some Gnostics, like the Manichees, argued that material creation is, in fact, evil. So they denied that God created the world. Accordingly, they also denied the humanity of Jesus Christ, because they believed he could lead us back to the spiritual world.

Arianism, seeing Jesus as human, and the material world as created by a creature, drove a wedge between God and the world, and made it logically impossible for Jesus to reunite us with God.

To refute Arius, the Nicene Creed uses the paradoxical term 'eternally begotten'. By this, the Nicene Fathers claimed that the Son's begottenness is not an event in time but an eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. The Son eternally shares the divine nature 'from the Father' and is thus 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.'

They added that Jesus is 'begotten, not made'. If you make something, it does not share your nature, but when you beget a child, your child is of the same substance and nature as you. Saying 'through him all things were made' is saying that Jesus is one with the 'maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.' He is the 'logos' or Word, that is, the Word by which God made the world come into being.

Father/Son language can be disturbing for people who wonder how the Bible can speak adequately of God in gendered (and exclusively male) terms. I think this stems not so much from patriarchal political bias but from the underlying ancient biological understanding, in which procreation was a male power. Women were believed to be only nurturers of a foetus, not co-creators, as we now understand them to be. In a patrilineal society, moreover, it is a son who carries the substance and identity of his father, whereas daughters are assimilated into another family on marriage.

The female manifestation of God is none the less well-documented in the Hebrew scriptures, in references to the Spirit, Wisdom, breath, the 'glory of God', fire, thunder, the dove, and so on, and she is incarnated in the Gospels by Mary, the mother of God and manifested as the Spirit who anoints Jesus and directs his teaching, working her healing power through him, and is with him till the final moment when he gives her up in death on the cross.

The Holy Spirit's Procession

The original Creed of Nicaea ended with 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.' Because Arianism resurfaced almost immediately after the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople of 381CE reaffirmed the Nicene Creed and expanded its description of the Holy Spirit — so what we really say now is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

We are to worship the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Father and the Son. After this, the creed specifies the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. Originally, it said that the Spirit only proceeded from the Father. Later, and not without controversy, the phrase 'and the Son' was added (the *filioque* clause). Because of the recovery of awareness of the Holy Spirit's agency from the beginning of the Hebrew scriptures, and to avoid lopsidedness in the Trinitarian pattern, the Western Church has more or less admitted that the Eastern Church was right all along to reject the *filioque* clause.



'Jesus is Lord' (Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, *Kýrios Iēsoûs*) is the shortest creed found in the New Testament. It is found in 1 Corinthians 12.3; Romans 10.9 and probably in the baptisms referred to in Acts 8.16; 19.5 and 1 Corinthians 6.11 'in the name of the Lord Jesus', or 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (Philippians 2.11).

In antiquity, the term 'lord' was a courtesy title for social superiors or husbands, but its root meaning was 'ruler'. Kings everywhere were styled 'Lord' and often considered divine beings so the word acquired a religious significance. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the Septuagint at least two centuries before Christianity, *Kurios* was used for the divine (and unpronounceable) tetragrammaton YHWH, which was never spoken. The reader would say '*adonai*'.

When in 27BC the Roman Emperor Octavian received the title of 'Augustus' it was a veiled form of emperor-worship. To refuse to honour the national gods was treacherous.

To say 'Jesus is Lord' prioritised an individual's loyalty to Jesus above the state, notwithstanding Jesus's commandment to love one's neighbour.



The First Council of Nicaea V. Surikov (1876-7)

Deeds, not Creeds?

'Christianity is the only major religion to set such store by creeds and doctrines' (Frances Young, *Making of the Creeds*). 'The early Church was from the start a believing, confessing, preaching Church' (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*). 'Creeds and confessions of faith have their origin in a twofold Christian imperative, to believe and to confess what one believes' (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*).

In the last three or four centuries, creeds and doctrines have been viewed with suspicion, after the horrors of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Wars of Religion, Pietism, Romanticism, and popular interest in mystical experience. Even though Protestants emphasised personal faith and scripture against ecclesiastical tradition, they none the less formulated their own creeds, such as the Augsburg Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession. Many influential movements within the Churches, such as Quietism (France), Pietism (Germany), or breakaway movements like the Quakers and Free Churches (Europe and the US), prioritised devotional experience over doctrinal statements.

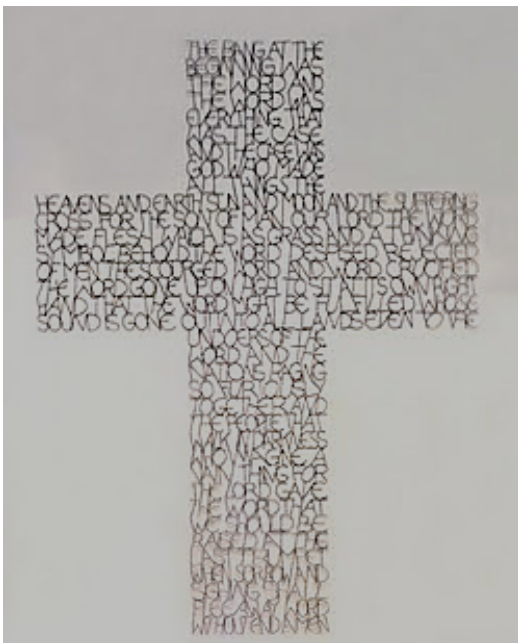
One historical perspective on Christianity is that it attracted vulnerable people who were underdogs in the social structures of the Roman Empire. When Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea could enforce conformity, they suppressed Christianity's original egalitarianism. Creeds were thus a tool in the political/ecclesiastical abuse of power.

Creeds and councils pre-date Emperor Constantine by at least two centuries, but many modern Christians share a suspicion of doctrinal truth claims. ‘Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus’ by Jefferson Bethke has over 34 million views on YouTube. In it, he articulates a preference for a personalized faith over Church doctrines: ‘Religion says do, but Jesus says done.’ For him and for many people who say ‘I’m spiritual, not religious’, a true Christian pursues a personal relationship with Jesus, not membership of a Church.

Also, to some, a creed is a rigid, black and white set of words, while discipleship is flexible, relational, and contextual. Doctrine demarcates boundaries and puts up walls barring outsiders, while discipleship means following Jesus into dialogue with the world and welcoming those whose views and values differ from ours.

Against that view, we can celebrate the creed because it can function in quite the opposite way: it articulates authentic *shareable* and *shared* personal experiences of a relationship with God (necessarily) in intelligible, reproduceable words.

Creeds were written to be for memorised and recited. They are rhythmic and lyrical. There is a cadence to them. They are therefore easy to pass on to others. To regard them as instruments of exclusion and control is to ignore their history, for originally creeds were the normal way people were educated and *included*, particularly in readiness for baptism, when a candidate was offered the opportunity to confess their faith, together with the congregation who shared it.



WordCross Tom Phillips (wire, 1987)

Jesus prayed that his disciples would be one (John 17.21). St Luke observes that the post-Pentecost Church ‘had everything in common’ (Acts 2.44). St Paul speaks of the Church as the ‘body of Christ’ and pleads with his readers in the churches he founded to be united.

(1 Corinthians 12.12-28; Ephesians 4.3-6)

‘For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarrelling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?’ (1 Corinthians 1.11-13)

Pluralism was exacerbated by many more writings that circulated throughout the churches. Which literature and teachers were authentic and which ones were false? The Creeds, then, were essential for evangelisation, education, and empowerment.

Why are (the Church's) words important?

Another reason why doctrinal confession in words (as well as in action) feels central to Christianity is because God's presence among us is as Word (John's Gospel 1.1). God comes to us announcing good news, teaching and preaching in the synagogue, sending us out as heralds and apostles. To be faithful to the Word, we respect every utterance we make, ensuring that what we say echoes the Word that sounded in the beginning and dwelt among us.

Not only did Jesus come to the world as the Word, but he promised to give his followers the words to speak on his behalf when the world rejects their message (Luke 21.15). In the Book of Acts, Christians were called upon to speak of their faith. Before the council of Jewish leaders, Stephen gave a statement of his beliefs, establishing the precedent of martyrs giving public profession of their faith for which they were prepared to die. Stephen's public profession of faith would be repeated by every candidate for baptism.

We show our commitment to Christ, the apostles, and martyrs by preserving the words they spoke, by making our own apostolic profession of faith. It's through words that their faith is faithfully passed down to us, and we pass it on to our children, grandchildren and godchildren.

Creeds also remind us that our faith is a gift. They teach us that faith is to be received, not revised. We cannot improve upon what God has said and done; we can only profess his Word to others.

The creeds remind us that the integrity of our faith is measured not on the strength of our inner feelings or what might be useful or popular or easily understood, but on our trust in what has been revealed to us. We recite the words we have learned in order to discipline our speech so that it is faithful to the Word.

God is.

God is as he is in Jesus.

Therefore we have hope.

A contemporary creed by Bishop David Jenkins

Afterword

Extract from a Lent series on The Thirty-Nine Articles by Simon Vibert (8 March 2017)

Article VIII — Of the Three Creeds: *The Three creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture.*

Some of the 39 Articles were particularly contentious, and reflective of the controversies of the 16th Century Reformation in England and the Continent. Not so Article Eight. But despite widespread assent to these three creeds in the 16th and 17th centuries, the same is not true today. In 21st-century England, there is contention over the function — and sometimes the theology — of the three creeds. Why? For three reasons, in ascending seriousness:

First, the creeds are largely not consistently recited in Anglican public worship. Maybe some believe them to be too formulaic, or jarring with an age which sees little pedagogical value in rote repetition.

Second, the creeds — particularly, but not exclusively, the Athanasian Creed — are unknown to today's Anglicans. Hence, far from being a touchstone of orthodoxy, they do not provide the true test of authentic faith as intended.

Third, the creeds often are ignored when matters of public discourse and debate surface. The Church of England is in danger of forgetting the lessons learnt by previous generations which led to the formation of the creeds.

It seems to me that ensuring the three creeds are used in our corporate worship is highly desirable. Here are four Anglican reasons why I believe this to be the case:

1. Our faith is public. Neither in the scriptures nor in our liturgy, is faith thought of as merely a private, personal affair. 'Let the word of God dwell among you (*plural*)', it says in Colossians 3.16. Along with the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Anglican liturgy assumes that our worship is a public declaration.

2. Our faith requires active assent. We are called to believe with our heart and confess with our lips in order to be saved (Romans 10.9-10). The act of consenting to the biblical beliefs of the Church is necessary for salvation. This is more than a recitation of the creeds, but surely not less?

3. Our faith is corporate and communal. In an individualistic age we want to affirm that corporate worship, somehow and in God's providence, is more than the sum of the individuals' present.

4. Our faith is liturgical. It may well be that early forms of the creeds lie behind 1 Corinthians 15.3-7, Philippians 2.5-11, and 2 Timothy 2.8-13. If this is the case then we have the earliest commendation of a form of set liturgy, to be recited in public worship.