



The Trinity in the Ancient Creeds

LECTURE 4. INTRODUCTION TO THE TRINITY

ALEC & BELLE WATERHOUSE LECTURES

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Outline

- A. The Apostles' Creed
- B. The Nicene Creed
- C. The Athanasian Creed
- D. Later Confessions

The Development of the Creeds

- The ancient creeds developed from a sustained and careful reading of Scripture and after great controversy over the identity of God.
- Their original form began with the baptism formula. To this form, the *kerygma*, or apostolic preaching, was added.
- Among the earliest surviving examples we have are from the late 2nd Century and early 3rd Century fathers, Tertullian and Irenaeus—these were known as *regula fidei*, “rule of faith.”
- They were used as catechetical instruments—*traditio* and *redditio*, the giving and returning of the teaching.
- A creed functioned as a “symbol,” a form of identification for Christians across wide spaces.

A. The Apostles' Creed

(Symbolum Apostolicum)

I believe in God the Father, omnipotent, Creator of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his unique Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; descended to the dead; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended to heaven [and] was seated at the right hand of God the Father omnipotent, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church universal, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life eternal. Amen.

B. The Nicene Creed

(Symbolum Nicaeno-Constantinopolinatum)

[Like the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed is comprised of three articles, on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.]

We believe in one God, the Father; Ruler of all, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

The Nicene Creed

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God; who was begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one essence with the Father; through whom all things came into existence. Who, for us human beings and for our salvation, descended from heaven and took flesh by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became human. Who was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate and suffered death and was buried; and he rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures; and he ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of the Father; and again he will come with glory to judge the living and the dead; his kingdom will have no end.

The Nicene Creed

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver; who is proceeding from the Father; who with the Father and the Son is together worshiped and together glorified; who spoke through the prophets. [We believe] in one, holy, universal, and apostolic church. We confess one baptism unto the forgiveness of sins. We anticipate the resurrection from the dead and life in the coming age. Amen.

C. The Athanasian Creed

(Symbolum Quicunque)

Whoever wants to be saved should above all hold this as a tenet of the universal faith. Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally. This is the universal faith:

We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor separating the substance. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is another. But the deity of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coeternal in majesty.

The Athanasian Creed

What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit; uncreated Father, uncreated Son, uncreated Spirit; infinite Father, infinite Son, infinite Holy Spirit; eternal Father, eternal Son, eternal Holy Spirit—and nevertheless not three eternal, but one eternal; thus also not three uncreated nor three infinities, but one uncreated and one infinite.

The Athanasian Creed

Likewise, omnipotent Father, omnipotent Son, omnipotent Holy Spirit—and nevertheless not three omnipotents, but one omnipotent. Therefore God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—and nevertheless not three gods, but one is God. Therefore Lord Father, Lord Son, Lord Holy Spirit—and nevertheless not three lords, but one Lord.

The Athanasian Creed

Because Christian truth compels us to confess each distinct person as God and Lord, therefore universal religion prohibits us from saying there are three gods or lords. The Father is neither made nor created nor begotten. The Son is from the Father alone, neither made nor created but begotten. The Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten but proceeding.

The Athanasian Creed

Thus one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three sons; one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits. And in this Trinity, none is before or after, none is greater or less, but the entire three persons are coeternal and coequal. Thus it is completely as has been said above: We must worship Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. As a result, whoever would be saved should think thus about the Trinity.

The Athanasian Creed

But it is necessary to eternal salvation that the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ be faithfully believed. For this is the right faith that we believe and we confess: That our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is God and man. He is God, begotten from the substance of the Father before the worlds, and he is man, born from the substance of his mother in the world; perfect God, perfect man, subsisting with a rational soul and a human body, equal to the Father according to divinity, less than the Father according to humanity.

The Athanasian Creed

Although he is God and man, nevertheless he is not two but is one Christ; one moreover not because he has converted divinity into flesh but because he has assumed humanity into God; one entirely not by confusion of substances but by unity of person. For as the rational soul and body are one man, thus God and man is one in Christ.

The Athanasian Creed

He suffered death for our salvation, descended into hell, on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, sitting at the right hand of the Father omnipotent, from where he will come again to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all human beings shall rise bodily to give account for what they have done. And those who have done well will enter eternal life; those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the universal faith, which unless one believes it faithfully and firmly one may not be saved.

D. Later Confessions

- All the major orthodox Christian denominations, including evangelical ones, typically use in worship or teaching one or more of the ancient creeds.
- Cf. The Book of Concord (Lutheran); The Westminster Confession (Reformed); The Orthodox Creed (Baptist); Baptist World Alliance, 1905
- The primary groups rejecting the creeds have been apostate and cultic: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostal

Later Confessions

- During the Salters' Hall Debate of 1719, the Dissenting Denominations (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists), argued over whether subscription to a short creed was to be required. Three major concerns were at play:
 1. In order to ensure *orthodoxy*, some voted for subscription.
 2. In order to ensure *liberty of conscience* against the persecuting state, others voted against subscription.
 3. Also of real concern was that the Word of God should not be supplemented by a *required human construct*.