

**GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**THE CREED: EXPOSITION OF THE FAITH**  
“What *you* believe, and why.”

*What is the Creed?*

A creed is a confession. *Credo* is the first word of the Apostles’ Creed in Latin. It means “I believe”. A creed is a declaration, an affirmation, by which each Christian states the core content of his/her faith. A creed takes that complex collection of history, narrative, poetry, preaching, letters of encouragement and instruction, visions, and parables, which comprise Scripture and summarizes this content of the faith into a statement that each of us can learn and recite. A creed is a personal statement of religious conviction, by which we say, “This is what I believe; this is my faith.”

A creed defines “orthodoxy” (belief defined as true by revelation) not “orthopraxy” (correct practice and conduct). A creed is not about “do’s and don’ts,” but about who God is and how we relate to Him in identity.

The content of the Creed is *dogma*. This means that it is not subject to debate (as is *doctrine*) or change (as is *discipline*).

- Dogma: Unchanging revelation. One cannot deny dogma without defining oneself as “heterodox” (one who professes a different faith).
- Doctrine: A theological explanation. For example, we can explain how original sin becomes part of our human nature using different analogies.
- Discipline: What we do in church order. For example, can priests be married or must they remain celibate?

*Is the Creed scriptural?*

Many independent churches do not use the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. Sometimes this is because they do not agree with the content of a specific statement in the Creed. Sometimes this is because of a combination of prejudice and lack of information. For example, some people won’t say the Creed because it refers to the “one holy, *catholic*, and apostolic Church,” and they think this refers to the Roman Catholic Church. (The word “catholic” is the Greek word for “universal”.) The most common objection to the Creed is, however, that “it’s not in the Bible”.

In these classes we’ll examine the origin and meaning of each phrase in the Creed, and we’ll find that no part of the Creed is in conflict with any part of Scripture, and that each phrase is grounded in revelation contained in the Bible. Sometimes this is indirect. For example, the Creed refers to God as “creator of heaven and earth”. God is so described

in the first chapters of *Genesis*. Sometimes, however, the scriptural origin of a phrase in the Creed is quite direct. Compare, for example, the Creed with:

- **1 Cor. 8.6:** “[F]or us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
- **1 Cor. 15.3-4:** “... I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures ...”

Note that writing only about twenty years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Paul is already referring to what he has “received”. The content of the faith has been testified to from the beginning, and Paul instructs us that the content of the faith matters:

- **2 Thess. 2.15:** “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us ...”
- **Rom. 6.17:** Paul gives thanks that as Christians we have “... become obedient to the standard of teaching to which you were committed ...”
- **2 Tim. 1.13:** We are enjoined to “Follow the pattern of sound words which you have heard from [Scripture], in the faith ...”

### *When was the Creed first used?*

When we refer to the Creed we are referring, actually, to two separate creedal statements, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.<sup>1</sup> The Apostles’ Creed is used in the Daily Office of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, at Baptism and at Burial. The Nicene Creed is used in services of Holy Eucharist. The idea of a creed as a statement of faith arose, probably, in the *Shema* of the Jews. The *Shema* (named for its first word, “Hear”) is found at Deut. 6.4, and is a communal and personal confession that there is no God but God: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus identifies this confession as the “great and first commandment” (Matt. 22.38).

The **Apostles’ Creed** is the ancient creed of Baptism. It evolved from the statement of faith made in the earliest Christian rites of Baptism, which statement came to be known as the “Old Roman Symbol,” set forth by St. Hippolytus writing in A.D. 96., in his description of Christian worship in Rome. This form of worship is thought to have evolved from the teaching given the Christian community in Rome by Peter, Mark and Paul (in the 60’s) and the testimony of the earliest Christians in Rome (after Pentecost, in the 30’s). In other words, the Creed goes back to the earliest apostles and recites what they have witnessed, what they have been taught in Scripture, or what they learned by divine revelation (Gal. 1.12).

The **Nicene Creed** can trace its formulation to the First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). The form we recite was amended and completed at the First Council of Constantinople

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<sup>1</sup> A third Creed, the Athanasian Creed or *Quincunque vult*, is sometimes used in worship on the Feast of the Holy Trinity (Trinity Sunday), but its use is not enjoined in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Athanasian Creed can be found at BCP pp. 864–5.

(A.D. 381), and is thus referred to, technically, as the “Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed”! The council of Nicaea was summoned by the emperor Constantine to define doctrine in the face of disputes about the true nature of the Person of Christ, and of His salvific work. Much of the language of the Creed is designed to define exactly who Jesus is, *e.g.*, that He is God and not a created being; that He rose from the dead and reigns in heaven not just as a “spirit” but as the God-Man of the Incarnation.

The Nicene Creed is much more specific in what it recites because it is designed to defend right belief in the face of heresy. The Nicene Creed is designed to recite who God is and how He relates to His creation through His three Persons of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It is designed to teach that these Persons are not merely “modes of action”. Because this Creed was written in response to disputes within and attacks upon the Church, the formulation used in the original is “We believe ...” rather than “I believe ...” for by this we recite how we come together as a Church that is *one, holy* (instituted and guided by God), *catholic* (universal in time and place), and *apostolic* (confessing the faith once-delivered by the witnesses originally commissioned by our Lord to bear His Gospel).

The Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed have been in continual use throughout the life of the Church. The only change ever made in the content of the Creed relates to the Holy Spirit. Beginning in 589 the Church in the West began to confess (in the Nicene Creed) that the Holy Spirit “... proceeds from the Father *and* the Son” rather than “from the Father *by* the Son”. This change was intended to clarify that the Holy Spirit participates fully in each other Person of the Trinity, and that each other Person participates fully in the Holy Spirit. In the West the formulation “*by* the Son” had given rise to some arguing that the Holy Spirit was in some manner subordinate to the other Persons of the Trinity. The Church in the East never saw things this way, and objected that no change could be made absent the summoning of an ecumenical council. This so-called “*filioque* dispute” remains a point of disagreement between the Church in the West and the East to this day.

### *Why use the Creed?*

“The law of prayer is the law of faith” (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). What we say matters, for it is by what we say in our common prayer that we define the content of our faith, what we believe.

The Creed is personal. Whether we say “I believe” (in the Apostles’ Creed) or “We believe” (in the Nicene Creed), the Creed is a statement of individual faith. Although as Christians we share common beliefs, the faith we confess in the Creed is to be our own. The Creed emphasizes personal responsibility and personal life in Christ, that we have received Jesus “in our hearts” and confess Him “with our lips” as our personal Lord and Savior. Although we speak for ourselves, we speak in unison, in concert with all the Church.

Faith is made up of two parts: assent and trust. We assent to a proposition by asserting it (“I believe *that* ...”). We describe what it is that we trust in (“I believe *in* ... “). Faith is,

in other words, both a rational commitment and an act of confidence, both a knowing (assent) and a doing (trust). In the Creed we describe both elements of our faith, and in doing so we describe our relationship with God. In the Creed we *define* our faith, what are its essentials and what are its boundaries. We confess that we are not at liberty to define our own relationship with God and to treat belief as a “smorgasbord” of convenience. The Creed is both a profession of faith and a rule of faith.

In our post-Enlightenment world we find the same old attacks on faith that Nicaea dealt with (*e.g.*, that Jesus is not God, or that He is not fully human), and the most persistent “modern” heresy: the replacement of the Christ of faith by the so-called “historical Jesus”. The historical study of Jesus and the Gospels is profitable indeed, but the quest for the “historical Jesus” has replaced faith in the resurrected Lord with a Jesus reconstructed solely on what history can reliably tell us, measured by the methods of a modern critical historian. The significance of Jesus is *not* simply His words and deeds in first-century Palestine (to the extent that we can know them). If Jesus is not the powerful risen Lord through whom we approach God, then the entire life of the Church is in error, and so attention to the Creed *matters*, for in the Creed we confess much, much more than what one man said and did in first-century Palestine. We confess much, much more than what this man taught. We confess our very life in God, “by whom, and with whom, and in whom” all things were made and are reconciled to God. We confess who *we* are as God’s sons and daughters.

- *Faith means assent.*
- *Faith means trust.*
- *Faith means commitment.*
- *Faith is obedience.*

**NEXT WEEK:** For the next four weeks we will examine the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed in parallel, phrase-by-phrase, to examine the content of our faith in detail.