

King's Online Bible School

Doctrine 101: Learning about God — Spotlight Studies

(adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Bible Doctrines* & R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*)

Confessing the Trinity (Lesson 4)

1. With the mouth we confess.

"By common confession, the mystery of godliness is great" (*cf.* 1 Tim 3:15-16)

The church in the first four centuries fought important battles that Christians never have to fight again. These were battles for truth.

In the first four centuries A.D., the church fathers saw how urgent it was to determine and define biblical truth. Christians were being exposed to teachings that violated Scripture's clear statements about God.

Church councils were convened and church leaders came together, asking the Holy Spirit to guide them in presenting these truths as statements that establish what Christians believe.

These are the truths that provide the foundation of understanding for knowing and believing in God. They have been set forth and preserved for us in the church's creeds (confessions of faith).

Each person coming to the Lord Jesus agrees to the basic truths the Scripture teach about God.

The Bible alone is the final authority for truth. Because the truths stated in the creeds have been painstakingly drawn from the Scriptures and because they are ruled and supported by the Scriptures, Christians through the centuries embrace three credal statements agreed upon and adopted at three major church councils.

Many congregations speak one of these confessions of faith in unison each time they meet for worship.

Doing so celebrates the grace we have been given in receiving God's revelation and trusting Jesus.

It recognizes the one new Man we have become in Christ with Christians everywhere.

It stirs our individual resolve to live and die for this Truth.

It builds and reinforces a framework of truth in our lives that helps us recognize and reject deception, falsehood, and error.

2. God in the flesh

The truth about the Trinity is a dominant focus of each of the three Christian creeds.

Closely related and equally important are the creeds' declarations about the Son, Who took on humanity to reconcile men to the Father.

We can see what a heated issue this was already in Jesus' ministry. when the Jews were ready to stone Him for declaring, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30-33).

In his epistles, John makes this the decisive issue in distinguishing between truth and falsehood:

"By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist . . ." (1 John 4:2-3).

"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh" (2 John 7).

The earliest Christian "creeds" (declarations of faith) appear already in the New Testament. One of the most common and significant confessions was "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3). With these three words "early Christians acknowledged that the Nazarene was to be spoken of in the same terms as Yahweh of the Old Testament" (B. Demarest, "Creeds," *New Dictionary of Theology*, 179).

At every Christian baptism the new believer is asked to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, Who became a man in this world to reconcile us to God the Father by His life, death, and resurrection.

3. The Apostles' Creed

In its earliest beginnings this creed was a much briefer Trinitarian baptismal formula:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ Jesus His Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh."

The wording developed gradually and was finalized in the eighth century.

The name affirms that this creed is a faithful expression of the apostles' teachings. It contains the fundamental articles of Christian faith necessary to salvation (Demarest, 179).

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Note: When Jesus died, His soul went to *Sheol* (the Old Testament word for the place of the dead). The New Testament equivalent is *Hades*, which English speakers have mistakenly understood to be a reference to hell. Newer translations of the creed correct the text of the creed to say, "He went to the dead."

4. The Nicene Creed

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

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.
Through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and His kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life,
Who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

The Nicene Creed was drafted at the Church Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) to refute the false teaching of Arius, who claimed that the Son was not God, but only God's highest creation. The creed emphasizes that the Son is God in every respect. Crucial phrases are "eternally begotten of the Father" and "of one Being with the Father:"

At the same time the Nicene Creed reestablished the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Who "proceeds from the Father." The church in the West recognizes that He also proceeds from the Son.

Note: "*holy catholic church*" – the word "catholic" is another word for "universal." It does not refer to Roman Catholicism, but to all believers who are members of Christ's church.

5. The Athanasian Creed

Here is one of the most stirring, perceptive, and beautiful statements written about the Trinity.

The name of the creed may give the impression that it was composed by Athanasius (the Archbishop of Alexandria in the fourth century). But there is evidence that it was written in Latin (not Greek) in the fifth century. The author is not known. Athanasius was the champion of biblical truth over Arius, and this creed established the truths for which Athanasius fought.

As you read this creed, it will be much more effective for you to read it aloud.

*Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.*

*And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.
For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.*

*Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.
The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.
And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal.
As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.*

*So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty;
and yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;
and yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;
and yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.*

*For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord;
So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords.*

*The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.
The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.*

*And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another.
But the whole three persons are coeternal together, and coequal.
So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.
He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.*

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.

God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.

Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.

Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.

Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God.

One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;

Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;

From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At Whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and shall give account of their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.