

## CHRISTIANITY—THE FIRST 300 YEARS

### The Apostle's Creed

#### EARLY STATEMENTS OF FAITH

In the New Testament letters, the apostles frequently addressed distortions of the Christian faith that they considered misleading or dangerous (2 Co. 11:4, 13-15; Ga. 1:6-9; Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:8; 1 Ti. 4:1-2; 2 Ti. 3:1-9; Tit. 3:9-11; He. 13:9a; 2 Pet. 2:3-22; 1 Jn. 2:18-19; 4:1-3; 2 Jn. 7, 10; Jude 4-19; Rv. 2:9, 14-15, 20, 24-25). Particularly in the face of heresies and distortions, the early Christians came to summarize the core beliefs that they held to be central. One finds such summaries in various New Testament in passages, such as, Ac. 8:37; 1 Co. 15:1-4; 1 Ti. 3:16; and 1 Co. 12:3. Paul, for instance, writes:

*Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Co. 15:3-4)*

As the decades rolled by and the church entered the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and beyond, Christians became more elaborate in their formulations. Outsiders, also, sometimes wondered about what Christians believed, much as today one might ask for a particular church's statement of faith. Eventually, the consensus of the orthodox faith came to be called, in the words of the Gallic monk Vincent of Lerins (d. AD 445), *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* (= that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all).

#### THE RULE OF FAITH

One of the most important compilations which summarized early Christian belief was called the "Rule of Faith." This basic outline was believed to be handed down unbroken and unaltered from the apostles, and while there were several variations, depending upon which heresy was being combatted at the time and in what place, the Rule of Faith was intended to describe the basic essence of Christian belief. It was used as a profession of faith at Christian baptisms, and in fact, it was customary to pose questions to the candidate at the time of his/her baptism. Hippolytus' (ca. AD 170-235) account of Christian baptism from about AD 215 is instructive.<sup>1</sup>

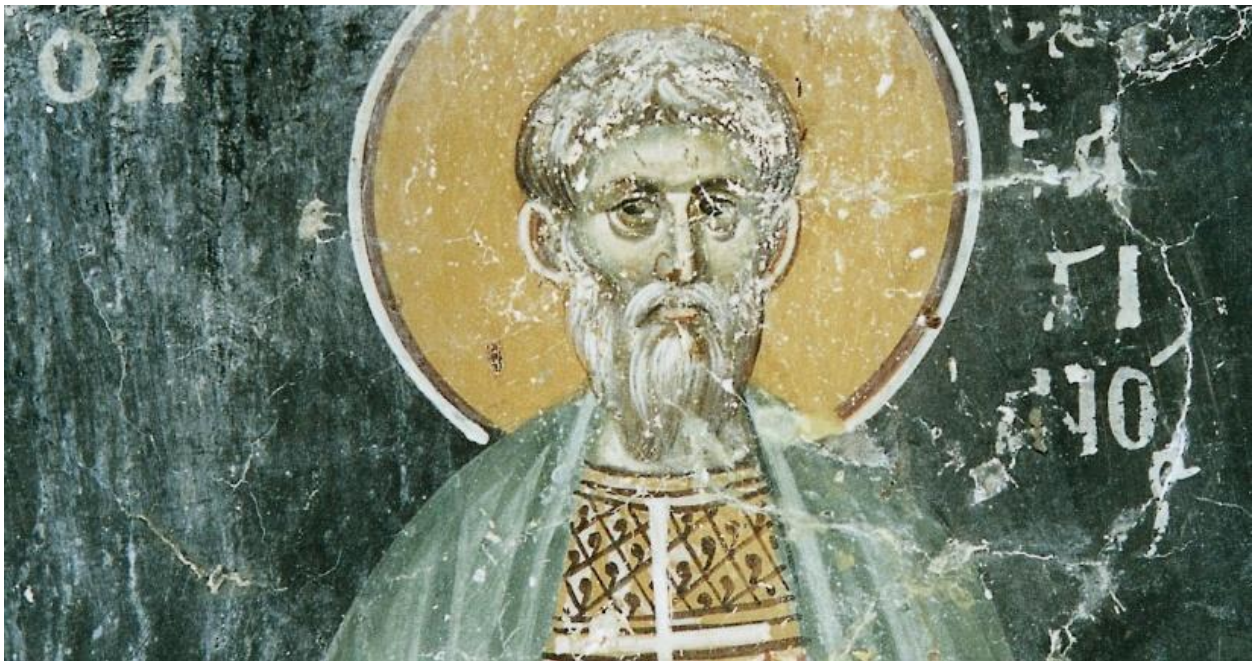
*When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say: "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?" And the person being baptized shall say: "I believe." Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptize him once. And then he shall say: "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?" And when he says: "I believe," he is baptized again. And again he shall say: "Do you believe in the*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, trans. Burton Scott Easton (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

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*Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?" The person being baptized shall say: "I believe," and then he is baptized a third time.*



*Hippolytus*

Notice the kinds of things that the Rule of Faith sought to protect. Against the Gnostic notion of creation by an inferior deity, the Rule of Faith affirmed that the universe was created by God, the Father. Against the Ebionites who rejected the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, it affirmed both to be true. Against Gnostics who doubted the physical death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, it affirmed that he truly died and truly arose. Against the sectarians who divided the church, it affirmed the catholicity of the church. Against the Manichaeans who denied the resurrection of the body, it affirmed the hope of resurrection. Jesus, not Mani, was the final revelation. Thus, the Rule of Faith was largely shaped as an orthodox response to the distortions of Christian teaching that were developing all around.

### THE APOSTLES' CREED

The Rule of Faith was not a creed with fixed wording, so in the writings of the church fathers one will find slight variations. Eventually, however, creeds with fixed wording were adopted as adaptations of these baptismal questions based on the Rule of Faith. The most significant early creed, dating from about the mid-4th century in its earliest form, is the Apostles' Creed. This creed summarizes the central confessional teachings drawn from the writings of the apostles and the Rule of Faith (cf. Mt. 28:19; Ac. 8:37; 16:31; Ro. 10:9; 1 Co. 8:6; 15:3-4; 2 Co. 13:14; Ep. 4:4-5; Phil. 2:10-11; 1 Ti. 2:5-6; 3:16; 6:13-14; 2 Ti. 2:8; 1 Pe. 3:19; 1 Jn. 5:1).<sup>2</sup>

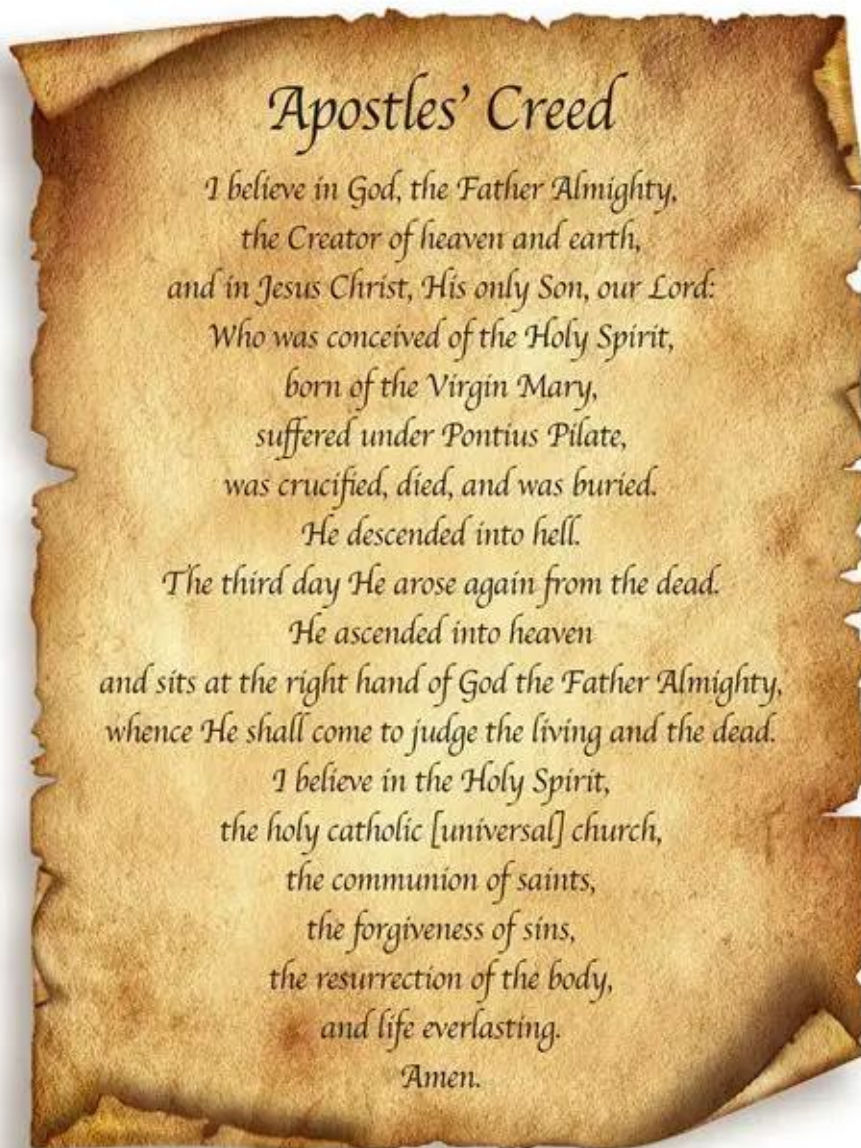
<sup>2</sup> For slight variations in the development of the Apostles' Creed, see H. Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1963), pp. 23-24.

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The Apostle's Creed is constructed around affirmations concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This triadic pattern is remarkable, since it probably predates the formal definition of the Trinity at the Council of Nicaea. Such a statement was especially important as the gospel moved outward into Gentile circles. Among Jews and Samaritans, the Almighty God as the Creator of the universe and the Holy Spirit as the active inspiration of God through the prophets could be assumed. It was the messiahship of Jesus Christ which was paramount.<sup>3</sup> However, for Gentiles,

with their background in pagan deities and pagan spirit worship, the affirmation of the one true God as the Father, Jesus Christ as God's Son, and the Holy Spirit, was a more complete confession.<sup>4</sup>

While most of the lines in the Apostles' Creed are taken directly from the New Testament, three phrases merit special attention. The first is the phrase, "He descended into *hades* [or hell]." This line is based on several New Testament passages describing the interval between Jesus' death and resurrection. In this interval, he descended into the nether regions (Ep. 4:9; cf. Mt. 12:40), he "preached to the spirits in prison" (1 Pe. 3:18-19; 4:6), he was in the abyss until his resurrection (Ro. 10:6-



<sup>3</sup> This is likely the reason that there is a shorter baptismal formula in the Book of Acts, which mentions only Christ Jesus the Son (Ac. 2:38; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5). Jews and Samaritans already believed in Yahweh and the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> This triadic confession and the triadic baptismal formula which accompanied it was probably popularized in Gentile Christianity. It is the formula that Christ himself commanded when he commissioned the apostles to go to the nations (Mt. 28:19), and it came to be the standard baptismal wording of the church (*Didache* 7).

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7), but in the end he was not abandoned but raised to life by the Father (Ac. 2:24-32). While there remain some variant interpretations about the meaning of Christ's descent into the underworld (the church fathers varied between the idea that he proclaimed the gospel, offering salvation to those who had died earlier, to the idea that he announced his victory over Satan and death to the underworld), at the very least these passages mean that Christ's death was real as opposed to those who denied it. Some translations of the creed phrase it, "He descended to the dead." This was important, especially in the face of Gnostic ideas that Jesus was not a real human being or the idea that he didn't really die.

The other two phrases, the "catholic church" and the "communion of saints," concern vocabulary. The Greek term *katholikos* means "through the whole" or "universal." It had been used by Christians from the early 100s to describe the whole church in the whole world. This word in the creed should be distinguished from "Roman Catholic Church," which is a later formulation. The "communion of saints" refers to the fact that all Christians, living or dead, belong to a single body. Those living are "alive in Christ" (Ro. 6:11; Ep. 2:4-5), and those deceased are "dead in Christ" (1 Th. 4:14, 16). However, Christ is Lord of both the living and the dead (Ro. 14:9), and whether living or deceased, together they form a single body that will be reunited in the resurrection when Christ returns (1 Th. 4:15-17).

### A THEOLOGICAL CENTER

By the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the idea of a creed came to be called the *symbolum* (Greek *συμβολον* = "sign" or "token of identification"). Ambrose, in a letter from about AD 390, refers to it as a mark of identity, "Let them [those who claim to be Christians] give credit to the Symbol of the Apostles." This idea of a creed as a theological center is important, because it immediately acknowledges that all theological opinions do not belong in the center. Christians have always held a variety of views about theological issues without requiring uniformity, and this seems evident even in the New Testament. Paul, when writing to the Philippians, says, "And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you" (Phil. 3:15). Christians might have differing opinions on whether or not to drink wine or eat meat or observe a holy day (Ro. 14:2, 5, 21), and Paul clearly allows for this (Ro. 14:3-8), consigning the final evaluation of such things to God alone (Ro. 14:10-12, 22a). In their pleas for the unity of the church, the apostles did not call for an artificial uniformity. Christians needed to confess uniformly those things in the center, but they could hold various opinions about things outside the center. For instance, there was a lively debate in North Africa over how to translate the word describing the plant that grew up over Jonah's head (Jon. 4:6). Early translations had identified it as "ivy," but Jerome in the Latin Vulgate translated it as a "gourd." Neither the "ivyists" nor the "gourdists" were treated as heretics, since the issue was not central to the gospel.

A creed, then, helped define the theological center. It was a confession where all Christians could stand together without equivocation, despite whatever other differences they may have had. It reminded Christians that these central truths had been given once for all and were intended to be held perpetually. It provided a boundary and definition for core beliefs. Since literacy was only about 10% in the Greco-Roman world and the majority of early Christians were not literate, creeds were short enough to be memorized.