

Christian Orthodoxy Defined

Orthodoxy is the common beliefs, the central truths shared by all true believers. The opposite of orthodoxy is heresy. Over the years, a number of statements of orthodox beliefs have been constructed to combat heresies in the church. The statements define a standard method of Biblical interpretation as well as a concise confession of faith.

Apostle's Creed. This was the first, and simplest, of the great creeds of the church. It was first stated in about 110 AD, probably in Rome, but it was based on a baptismal confession used for new converts in the early church. It was certainly used to refute such early heresies as nicolaitinism and the creed of Apelles (a Gnostic leader). There are two forms: the Roman or short form and the Received or long form. The short form is the oldest recorded statement, with the phrases of the long form added over the next 200-300 years. The following statement of the Apostle's Creed is the Received form with the added portions in parentheses.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; (Maker of Heaven and Earth;) And in Jesus Christ His only *begotten* Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost; born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified dead and buried; (He descended into hell (or Hades);) the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at 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 (catholic) Church, (the communion of saints,) the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, (and life everlasting)."

Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed was authorized by the Council of Nice in 325 AD, and completed by the Council of Constantinople in 381. It was authorized to counter the opinions of Arius and other heretical doctrines at the time. It reads as follows:

"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man; And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets. And I believe in one Holy Christian (or catholic) and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, And the Life of the world to come. Amen."

Notice that the Nicene Creed builds upon the Apostle's Creed. Likewise, further attacks on the orthodox faith were addressed by further creedal development. The Symbolum Quicunque (Athanasian Creed) further defined the concept of the Trinity. The Protestant Reformation led to further elaborations of creed, doctrine and faith, such as the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Lutheran Confession), The Genevese (Calvanist) Confession of 1549 (consisting of 26 articles), Synod of Dort Creed of 1619 (Dutch Reformed), Heidelberg Catechism, 39 Articles of Confession (Church of England), and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Each of these creeds or confessions of faith has become more extensive and well defined-as needed to address perceived attacks on the central faith of the Church. The Westminster Confession is widely accepted outside of the Scottish traditions from which it arose as it is very well documented with supporting Scripture; however, the Nicene Creed is the latest Creed universally accepted by all denominations of Christian churches in both the Eastern and Western traditions. The Westminster Confession of Faith consists of 92 statements of faith arranged in 33 Chapters. The Confession is supplemented by the Westminster Catechism, consisting of 196 questions and answers. While the early creeds only focused on the nature of God and of Christ, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the universal church, the latter creeds expound on the inspiration of the Bible, the nature of man, salvation, the last times, and other elements of doctrinal importance. The extensive teachings of the New Testament (on which the early creeds were built) warning about false teachings point to 3 pillars of faith:

1. Who is Jesus Christ?--God come in the flesh. (See Phillipians 2)
2. What is the work of Christ?--He who fulfilled the Law, was crucified for our sins, and was resurrected that we might have eternal life through Him. (See 1 Corinthians 15)
3. What is the Bible?--The Word of God, immutably and infallibly expressing the will and character of God. (See 2 Timothy 3 and 2 Peter 1)

All false teachings and doctrinal perversions deviate from the orthodox answers to these questions.

Athanasian Creed Although not written by Athanasias the Great, a champion of orthodoxy against the Arian attacks on the doctrine of the trinity, the creed arose circa 400 A.D. and was the last of the great creeds "universally" accepted by the church. Later theological developments in the Eastern Orthodox Church caused that arm of the church to accept the principles of the creed while rejecting the accepted wording. The wording of the judgment principle is an element of dispute since salvation is only by grace through faith in the orthodox position. Athanasias and Augustine both recognized that "good works" were only through faith in Jesus Christ (made available to us in the resurrection) and evil deeds are not imputed to the believer because of the atonement of Christ on the cross. The phrasing of the judgment principle has led to a historical abuse wherein the works of the believer were incorporated into the doctrine of salvation by certain sects. The translation below is the version accepted at the Christian Reformed Church Synod of 1988 (a modern language translation).

"Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic (meaning universal) faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally. Now this is the catholic faith: That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory is equal, their majesty coeternal. What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated. The Father is unmeasurable, the Son is unmeasurable, the Holy Spirit is unmeasurable. The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal. And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or unmeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being. Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being. Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God. Thus the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord. Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually as both God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords. The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone. The Son was neither made nor created; He was begotten from the Father alone. The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten; He proceeds from the Father and the Son. Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers; there is one Son, not three Sons; there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits. Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other. So in everything, as was said earlier, we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity.

"Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity. But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully. Now this is the true faith: that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally. He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and He is human from the essence of His mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal with the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity. Although He is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by His divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to Himself. He is one, certainly not by the blending of His essence, but by the unity of His person. For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human. He suffered for our salvation; He descended to hell; He arose from the dead; He ascended to heaven; He is seated at the Father's right hand; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead. At His coming all people will rise bodily and give an accounting of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

"This is the catholic faith; one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully."

What should our perspective be on the creeds? How do they relate to orthodoxy? Each of the creeds and confessions of faith from each of the arms of the church were created to provide common ground upon which the members of the body can succinctly stand. The creeds especially were created to counter heretical teachings within the church. The confessions of faith contain this same goal but also add interpretations of Scripture to be held in common by the members of a denomination. In other words, confessions of faith tend to go beyond essential minimum doctrine into areas of faith into areas of doctrine wherein there can be honest differences of opinion among true believers. Orthodoxy defines those areas which are right for all believers to hold in common. None of us should dispute over issues of the orthodox doctrine; however, we may disagree over issues which are not central orthodox doctrine as long as we maintain a faithful reference to the Bible as the fundamental source of truth. In this vein, we should recognize that the creeds and confessions do not supercede the Bible. Furthermore, we recognize that the creeds and confessions are NOT the inspired Word of God, although they are, for the greater part, derived from the Bible. The creeds and confessions can never replace personal Bible study. If you study the Bible and find it telling you something different from the orthodox creeds, you need to be extra careful to check your own interpretation; nevertheless, your perception of truth may be valid. On the other hand, be careful to pursue sound principles of interpretation and do not adopt an attitude that God has selected you alone for the revelation of truth. Be careful that your interpretation in no way contradicts the Bible. The creeds and confessions should be elements which help us to expose false teachers but also which call us into unity in the body of Christ.

The common elements of confession. The various creeds, confessions, and catechisms of Christian denominations do have differences; however, they share a remarkable commonality. Although the fine details and wordings and orderings

may differ, the confessional articles are essentially common. It is true that the later confessions address more topics of faith, but many of these topics were never a matter of question in the early church. The following list of common elements are derived from the 2 dozen or so most widely used confessions, creeds, and catechisms. The various creeds, confessions, and catechisms have from 5 to 200 articles or statements of varying complexities and levels of detail. Nevertheless, the common elements are either explicitly stated or alluded to in almost all of these confessions and catechisms and creeds. The dozens of confessional articles and catechism questions which go beyond this list embody many traditions of a particular denomination and Bible interpretations which are not universally shared by all Christian churches. Furthermore, each of the common elements below often have one or more explanatory interpretations attached to them which may differ from one confession to another. Therefore, while believers following two different confessions should agree on this list, they may disagree on the application to their life in faith. These differences should be treated as elements in which we can honestly differ without dividing, respecting one another's interpretations. Doctrines which differ substantially from this list should be considered aberrant or heretical and diligently tested against the Bible.

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, authoritatively true.
2. God is One God manifest in the Trinity, the only true God.
3. God is sovereign, almighty to do His will and incapable of having His will corrupted or influenced.
4. God created everything out of nothing.
5. God is providentially in control of all things.
6. Man is utterly sinful resulting from the disobedience of Adam, the original man. Without the salvation of Christ, each man is guilty of sin and stands condemned.
7. God provided for the redemption of man from sin. Man is incapable of saving himself.
8. The redemption of man is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who is both God and man.
9. Christ lived as a man, yet without sin.
10. Christ died for our sins on the cross and was buried, according to the Scriptures. (He is the propitiatory sacrifice our sins, the innocent for the guilty.)
11. Christ was raised from death in a bodily resurrection.
12. Christ has made eternal life available to those who believe in His work on the cross in His resurrection.
13. Man has a (free)will by which he chooses obedience or disobedience to God, yet not transcending the will of God.
14. All of mankind is not saved, but only those to whom God has chosen by His grace.
15. Believers can be assured that they are in a state of grace (saved).
16. There is a moral law which is decreed by God. (There is an absolute right and wrong).
17. Christ is the ultimate judge of all mankind.
18. Believers are charged to do good works and to keep the laws of men and to obey the (elders) over them in the congregation, so far as they are consistent with those of God, yet from faith in Christ rather than by obligation. The good works and obedience to authority in a believer's life will grow as a result of the sanctifying work of Christ in that believer's life.
19. The sacraments of baptism and of communion are to be held in common by all saints.
20. Christ was born by the Virgin Mary, who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.
21. Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father.
22. Christ is the head of the Church, having appointed (elders) over the individual congregations. These (elders) have the authority and responsibility to rightly divide the Word of God and to determine right conduct within the congregation. (The (elders) are especially accountable before Christ.)
23. Those who believe in Christ as their Lord and Savior shall be raised to eternal life in the likeness of Christ's resurrection, to be with Him in glory.
24. The Law of God, including (or especially) the Ten Commandments, is God's expressed will as to how we should live. The Law of God cannot be kept by sinful man, pointing to our need for a Savior.
25. Unbelievers are condemned and shall spend eternity in the Lake of Fire (some creeds say "Hell").

Note: The term "elders" is placed in () to signify that the different confessions use different terms.