



We Believe

*Creeds,
Catechisms,
& Confessions
of Faith*



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Creeds, Catechisms, and Confessions of Faith



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

We Believe: Creeds, Catechisms, and Confessions of Faith

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Introduction

Why Creeds and Confessions?

Sola Scriptura—this rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation sounded forth during that great sixteenth-century awakening when the Holy Spirit moved God’s people to return to Scripture and cast off the many unbiblical traditions of men that had been imposed by the Roman Catholic Church. Returning to divine revelation as the final and only infallible rule of faith, the Reformers and their heirs recovered the biblical gospel that had been all but lost under what had been added to Scripture over the centuries. Yet while the Reformers are known for what they cast aside, we must not overlook what they kept. In returning to the Scriptures, they set aside not all church traditions but only the ones that contradicted God’s Word. Traditions faithful to Scripture and that stood as sound expositions of the biblical teaching were kept. Preeminent among these were the ecumenical creeds and confessions of the faith such as the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon.

The Reformers kept these statements of faith and others because they are faithful summaries of the Bible’s teaching on key doctrines of the faith. At their best, creeds and confessions serve the purpose of summarizing what the church believes Scripture to teach, helping believers to know biblical doctrine, to discern false teaching, and to instruct others in the deep matters of God’s Word. While creeds and confessions do not take the place of Scripture and while they operate in submission to Scripture, time-tested creeds and confessions provide invaluable guidance to us as we seek to believe what God has revealed and only what God has revealed.

Everyone, in fact, has a creed or a confession that summarizes what he believes about essential matters of the faith. Even the statements “No creed but Christ” or “No confession but the Bible” are themselves creeds and confessions that communicate core convictions. Moreover, the minute we start

trying to relate one part of biblical teaching to another part, we are starting to form a creed.

Creeds are so important that we find basic creeds even in the Bible itself. The Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 is the fundamental creedal statement of biblical monotheism. Throughout the Epistles we find core summaries of the person and work of Christ that were likely recited or sung in the Apostolic Church. Philippians 2:5–11 summarizes the biblical teaching on the incarnation of the Son of God. First Timothy 3:16 masterfully encapsulates the work of Christ. These examples and others show us that summarizing and declaring our faith is a historical and biblical practice.

Protestant Creeds and the Purpose of This Work

From the start, Protestants put into creedal, confessional, and catechetical form their convictions regarding what the Bible teaches, both to instruct their people and to explain their differences with the theological views of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther wrote both a large catechism and a small catechism that summarize essential teachings on faith and practice by expositing the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps the most significant early Protestant confession is the Augsburg Confession, presented to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg as a summary of Lutheran beliefs and where they differed from both Roman Catholicism and the teaching of the Anabaptists. To this day, the Augsburg Confession remains the fundamental confession of the Lutheran tradition.

Throughout the sixteenth century, Reformed Protestants, who held sway in the Church of England, in Geneva, and elsewhere composed many different creeds, confessions, and catechisms including the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession. The Thirty-Nine Articles continue to guide the Anglican Communion, while the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession are two of the Three Forms of Unity that are the confessional foundation of the Dutch Reformed Churches. A host of other Reformed confessions written during the same period continue to serve the churches of the Reformed tradition.

One of the most important of the Reformed Confessions, the Canons of Dort, is the third of the Three Forms of Unity and has served to unite Christians from many different traditions who hold to a Reformed understanding

INTRODUCTION

of God's grace in salvation. A high point of Reformed confessionalism is represented by the Westminster Standards, written in the middle of the seventeenth century to reform the Church of England but which has subsequently been adopted by Presbyterians the world over.

This work is a collection of the aforementioned creeds, confessions, and catechisms and several others, providing the church a one-volume resource containing the most significant Protestant statements of faith ever formulated. This volume is offered to help Christians better understand the distinctions and commonalities among different Protestant traditions as well as to become better grounded in the faith once delivered to the saints.

Apostles' Creed

(SECOND CENTURY)

The Apostles' Creed is one of the earliest and most important statements of belief produced by the Christian church. Its present form is believed to have originated in Gaul (modern-day France) during the fifth century. It was likely based on an earlier creed from the second century known as the Old Roman Symbol, which was somewhat shorter and simpler. By the eighth century, the Apostles' Creed gained wide use in liturgical contexts as a brief and faithful summary of Christian belief.

The name of the creed comes from an early belief that it was written by Jesus' Apostles, with each Apostle writing one of the twelve articles of the creed. Over time, the name came simply to reflect the acknowledgment that the creed summarizes the teaching of the Apostles as they had received it from Christ Himself.

The creed teaches the basics of the Christian faith: the Trinity; the virgin birth, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ; the holy and universal church, the forgiveness of sin; and the bodily resurrection. Knowing these basics provides a good starting point for understanding Christianity and for differentiating it from other religions.

Apostles' Creed

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,
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose 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 catholic¹ church; the communion of saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting. Amen.

1 The word "catholic" refers to the universal church.

Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed

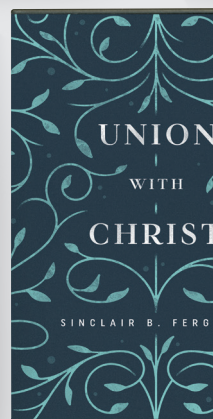
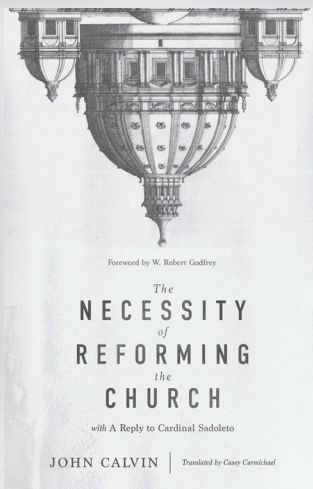
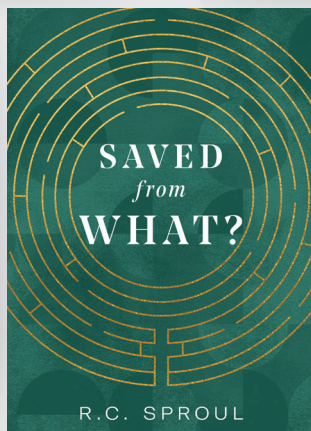
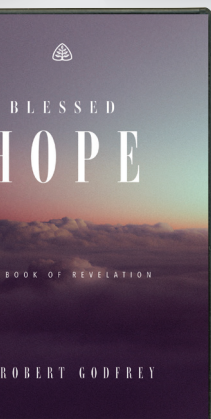
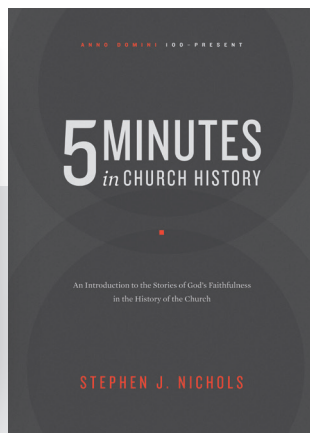
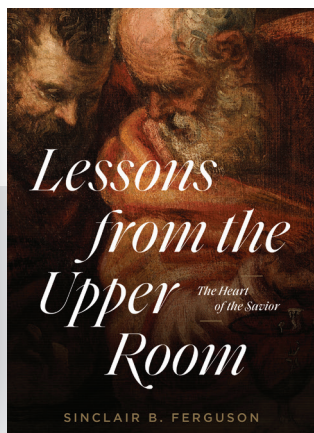
(325/381)

In the early fourth century, the teachings of a North African presbyter named Arius began to cause controversy in the church of Alexandria. Reportedly disturbed by a sermon preached by the orthodox bishop Alexander on the relationship between the Father and the Son that Arius understood as proclaiming Sabellianism (a form of modalism, the belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely different modes of the one God), Arius argued that if the Son is begotten, then He must have had a beginning. He famously declared, “There was a time when the Son was not.”

Alexander exiled Arius, who received support from various leaders in the church. The controversy soon spread, prompting Emperor Constantine I to call a church council to decide the issue. The First Council of Nicaea, held in 325 in modern-day Turkey, was attended by more than three hundred bishops from across the Roman Empire. It became known as the first ecumenical—representing all the churches—council of the post-Apostolic church. The orthodox party—led by Alexander and supported by Athanasius of Alexandria—prevailed, with the council affirming the full deity of the Son by concluding that He is *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father, rather than *homoiousios* (of like substance) or *heteroousios* (of different substance).

Arianism did not die, however. In the East, it was largely suppressed by 381, when the First Council of Constantinople revised and expanded the Nicene Creed, giving us the form we know today (and leading to the creed’s

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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