

Millennialism and the Three Ecumenical Creeds

by
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The three Ecumenical Christian Creeds¹ are a witness to the universal faith of all Christians. The three Ecumenical Christian Creeds serve to define content and boundaries of the Christian faith. Therefore any teaching that is at variance with the three Ecumenical Creeds is by definition outside the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity.

The Athanasian Creed defines the seriousness with which the church fathers took these doctrinal matters. The Athanasian Creed begins by stating: “Whoever wishes to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian [in the Latin, “catholic”] faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish for eternity.” The Athanasian Creed ends in similar fashion: “This is the true Christian [in the Latin, “catholic”] faith. Unless a man believe this firmly and faithfully, he cannot be saved.” With these words, the error of those who believe doctrine does not matter is laid bare.

The Athanasian Creed stands firmly over and against those who would separate the Word from doctrine; those who make experience the arbiter of faith; and those for whom faith is a matter of good works instead of an orthodox doctrinal confession. The Athanasian Creed clearly states that one’s salvation depends upon holding to the Christian faith, whole and undefiled. Those who fail to hold firmly and faithfully to the Christian faith, as confessed in the Creed, cannot be saved and will without doubt perish for eternity. Therefore the stakes are high. Eternal destiny is at stake, and it is therefore imperative for us to understand what the Creeds have to say regarding Last Things.

THE APOSTLES’ CREED

The Apostles’ Creed is an ancient Christian Creed. Legend attributes it to the 12 apostles, but the evidence suggests it arose in either the first or second century. The Apostle’s Creed is a confession of the orthodox faith over and against Gnosticism² and Marcionism³. Both the Gnostic and Marcion heresies denied the bodily death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord, and denied the bodily resurrection of the saints. For that reason the Apostles’ Creed is very plain that just as our Lord was born of the flesh, was crucified, died, and was buried, and was raised again from the dead on the third day, so too the saints will be bodily raised to life everlasting.

¹ The texts of the Three Ecumenical Christian Creeds are included at the end of this article.

² Gnosticism: Based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. Gnosticism thus rests on personal religious experience instead of fixed doctrine and practice. The truths found in religious “myths” are of a different and higher order than the truths found in religious dogma. The knowledge of God is reserved for the select few. For Gnostics, the material world is evil, and God did not create it. Therefore God could not have taken on a human body. God is transcendent, not immanent. The resurrection of the body is denied.

³ Marcionism: The God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament. Christ was God manifest, not Christ incarnate. Christ had a putative body, not a fleshly body. The resurrection of the body is denied.

The Apostles' Creed also makes it clear that at our Lord's returning, he will judge both the living and the dead. One return is in view, not two, as is the teaching of some. Furthermore, the second article makes it clear that return of Christ will usher in the day of judgment; and the third article makes it clear that the resurrection of the body will usher in the life everlasting. It is therefore necessary that the return, the resurrection, the judgment, and the beginning of the life everlasting occur as elements of the same event, not separated in time. Most chiliastic views separate these events, and some variants of these views add to the number of events. The Dispensationalist understanding, for example, has at least three resurrections⁴ and three judgments⁵. Thus the Apostle's Creed does not appear to support chiliasm.

By means of the Apostle's Creed, it is clear that eschatological concerns are part of the Gospel message and are an integral part of the universal Christian faith. The right praise of God must therefore include the proper understanding of these Last Things.

THE NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed was composed by the First Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) and amplified by the First Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.). The Nicene Creed is a confession of the orthodox faith over and against Arianism⁶, Apollinarianism⁷, Macedonianism⁸, and Chiliasm⁹.

While the confession over and against the other heresies are generally known, less well known is the confession over and against Chiliasm. At the end of the second article of the Nicene Creed, immediately following the description of Christ's return to judge the living and the dead, we find the phrase, "whose kingdom shall have no end." This phrase refers to Christ's everlasting reign, and was added at the insistence of St. Cyril of Jerusalem to combat to the second article specifically to combat Chiliasm. Chiliasm is known today as millennialism, and its best-known variant (at least in the United States) is Dispensationalism.

The Millennialist who does not subscribe to the Dispensationalist error sees the millennial kingdom as a future Golden Age where Christ rules over His people on the earth. For these Millennialists, this thousand-year reign is but the first stage of Christ's everlasting kingdom. The Dispensationalist sees Christ's millennial reign as being primarily a Jewish kingdom, and a fulfillment of the Kingdom promises made to Israel in the Old Testament¹⁰. For the Millennialist

⁴ Dispensationalism usually includes two resurrections of the saved: the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, with the bodily resurrection of the saints who have died; and the post-tribulation resurrection of the saints who died during the tribulation period. The resurrection of the unsaved takes place at the end of the Millennium.

⁵ Hoekema, A. (1977) Amillennialism. In R. G. Clouse (Ed.), *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (p. 183). Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press. Their will be the Great White Throne judgment of the unsaved,

⁶ Arianism: The Son is a created being.

⁷ Apollinarianism: The Son had a human body and soul, but a divine mind. Apollinarius was also a proponent of chiliasm.

⁸ Macedonianism: The denial of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They were also known as pneumatomachians, or the "spirit fighters."

⁹ Chiliasm: The belief in a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ upon the earth prior to the end of all things. The Nicene Creed adds the phrase "whose kingdom shall have no end" against this error.

¹⁰ In some sense Dispensationalism is a variant of the ancient Marcionite error, for the Dispensationalist divides the scriptures into two peoples of God, two plans of redemption (with each plan of redemption based on the person and work of Christ,) and two ultimate ends in view.

and the Dispensationalist, the Nicene Creed is difficult to get around. The Millennialist gets around it through sophistry, by making a flawed argument that the millennial reign of Christ on earth is “only the first stage of Christ’s eternal kingdom.”¹¹ but a first stage in the everlasting reign of Christ in heaven. This is a flawed argument because Christ’s earthly reign over a corrupted earth cannot be equated with Christ’s everlasting reign over a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). Furthermore, Christ’s millennial reign exists in time and has a definite end; Christ’s eternal reign exists outside of time and has no end.

The second article of the Nicene Creed repeats nearly word for word what we find in the Apostles’ Creed concerning Christ’s return to judgment. Like the Apostles’ Creed, it is clear that only one return is in view, and one judgment. The third article of the Nicene Creed contains some interesting variants from the Apostle’s creed. Instead of the “resurrection of the body,” the Nicene Creed speaks of the “resurrection of the dead.” Thus we know that it is the resurrection of the dead we are speaking of specifically, and not simply a bodily assumption of the living, (as occurred with Enoch and Elijah.)¹²

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

The Athanasian Creed was not written by Athanasius, but was instead composed around 500 AD. It seems reasonable that the use of Athanasius’ name was to honor the man who saved Christianity from the Arian heresy and maintained the faith against Julian the Apostate. The Athanasian Creed is a confession of the orthodox faith over and against Arianism, Nestorianism¹³, Monophysitism¹⁴, and Macedonianism. As previously discussed, the opening and closing lines of the Athanasian Creed proclaim its purpose: to proclaim the true Christian faith, without which a man cannot be saved. As the Athanasian Creed is primarily concerned with the proper definition of the triune God, it’s description of Christian doctrine is not as well rounded as that of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. Nevertheless, as touching the second article concerning Jesus Christ our Lord, the Athanasian Creed expresses the doctrine concerning Last Things in more detail.

¹¹ Battle, J. *Premillennialism and Covenant Theology*. The WRS Journal. Vol 2, Issue 1. pp. 5-6. Retrieved from http://www.wrs.edu/Materials_for_Web_Site/Journals/2-1%20Feb-1995/2-1%20Cover%20&%20Journal.pdf

¹² The eschatological hope contained in the Nicene Creed is the same hope proclaimed by the Apostle Paul:

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

(I Thes 4:13-18)

¹³ Nestorianism: Jesus exists as two persons: the Son of God, and the Son of Man.

¹⁴ Monophysitism: The belief that Christ had only one nature, as opposed to the Chalcedonian position that Christ has both a divine and a human nature.

Beginning at line 29, the Athanasian Creed turns its attention from the nature of the Trinity to the person and work of the incarnate Christ. Lines 38-43 are specifically concerned with Christ's passion, his death, resurrection, ascension, and his return to judgment. Of this return, the Creed states:

40. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
42. and shall give account of their own works.
43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

The careful reader will note that we have only one return of Christ, one resurrection, and one judgment in view. The Athanasian Creed is quite explicit in this regard, and does not countenance any "secret return" or rapture of the saints, and no separate resurrection and judgment of the saints and the damned. Any eschatological view that postulates multiple advents, resurrections, and judgments is therefore excluded from orthodoxy.

And so we have returned back to where we started, for the final line of the Athanasian Creed clearly states: "This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved." Therefore the confession of the Christian church is not only that false eschatological views form a demarcation between orthodoxy and error, but that these are soul-destroying errors.

We seek not to take pride in our orthodoxy, nor gloat over the error of our heterodox brethren, but rather that they might turn from their error and live. Our heart's desire and prayer for our heterodox brethren is that they might be saved. We know the terror of our Lord, and so we persuade men. We labor in hope that they, too, may be accepted by Him when we all appear at the judgment seat of Christ. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

The Apostles' Creed

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 catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN.

The Nicene Creed

We 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 the 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 Spirit 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 we believe in the Holy Spirit, 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 spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Athanasian Creed

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
3. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.
5. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.
7. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.
8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
9. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.
11. And yet they are not three eternal but one eternal.
12. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.
13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty.
14. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
15. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
17. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;
18. And yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.
19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;
20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords.
21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
22. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.
23. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
24. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.
25. And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another.
26. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.
27. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.
28. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.

29. Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
30. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.
31. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.
32. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
33. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.
34. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.
35. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God.
36. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.
37. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;
38. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;
39. He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;
40. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
42. and shall give account of their own works.
43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.
44. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.