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## THE CREEDS

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The Managing Editor is Rev. Michael Holmen.

All correspondence may be directed to:

Theological Journal for the Church  
c/o Iowa District East  
1100 Blairs Ferry Rd  
Marion, IA 52302



# What are the Ecumenical Creeds?

Pastor Christopher Neuendorf

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**A**s any regular churchgoer knows, the creeds form an integral part of our lives as Christians. We confess the Apostles' Creed, beautiful in its directness and simplicity, every morning and evening in our personal prayers. We confess the lengthier and more formal Nicene Creed at nearly every celebration of the Lord's Supper. We confess the majestic Athanasian Creed every Trinity Sunday. But what are these creeds that we so regularly confess? Inherent in the name "creed" is the fact that these are statements of faith, professions of what we believe. But something sets them apart from the sorts of "statements of faith" that vary from church to church. These creeds, far from being composed for the moment and disposed of soon thereafter, are actually permanent marks that identify us as Christians. They are banners that characterize the Church militant as opposed to all enemy armies. They are watchwords that reveal Christians to one another as those who hold the faith taught by Christ to His Apostles and preserved for posterity in the Holy Scriptures. In this sense, the three creeds that we regularly confess are truly "ecumenical."

What do we mean when we call these creeds "ecumenical"? To be ecumenical is to be global. The

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Pastor Christopher Neuendorf is pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Davenport, IA

three creeds that we regularly confess are ecumenical because they apply to global Christianity. And this global quality extends in both time and space, embracing both Christianity as it exists now over the entire world, and Christianity as it has always existed since the days of the apostles. The ecumenical creeds can be readily confessed by every true Christian in the world, whether Lutheran or Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Presbyterian, Baptist or Episcopalian, or any other form of Christianity. More to the point, these creeds *must* be confessed by anyone who wants to claim the name "Christian."

That may sound like an extreme statement, but it is true. That is because what makes the creeds ecumenical, or global, is not only the breadth of their acceptance, but also the scope of their concern. The creeds answer the primary question posed to the Church of Jesus Christ: Who is your God? Whom do you worship? Whom do you trust to save you from sin and death? The creeds answer this question by saying, in effect, that our God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the God who made heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who exists in three Persons. Our God is the God who, in the Person of His Son, took unto Himself a human nature and was made man in Jesus Christ. The creeds are the Church's way of saying that our God is Jesus Christ, the Father who begot Him from eternity, and the Spirit who eternally proceeds from both.

Those who cannot confess these creeds are simply not Christians. They cannot number themselves among those who by faith in the Son of God are a part of His bride, the Church, and thus they cannot be saved. That is why we have this striking and, to many, offensive statement in the Athanasian Creed: “Whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity. But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (26–27). How can the Athanasian Creed make such a sweeping and absolute claim? It justifiably makes this claim because if anyone thinks differently about the Trinity, claiming to worship three gods or claiming that the three Persons are not distinct or are not equally God, then this person has a false god and thus cannot be saved. Likewise, if anyone fails to believe the incarnation of Jesus Christ, then his god is not the God who became incarnate in Christ, the history of whose earthly life is accessible to us in Holy Scripture and summarized in our ecumenical creeds. To depart from the ecumenical creeds is to have a different god, a false god.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Mormons, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The LDS rejects the ecumenical creeds, particularly the Athanasian Creed. They do believe many of the truths asserted in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, particularly the biographical details of the life of Jesus, but they do not believe what these creeds assert about the unity of the three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one divine essence, or the unique divinity of Jesus Christ. The inability of Mormons to embrace the ecumenical creeds reveals that they are not a part of global Christianity. They are not members of the universal bride of Christ.

What of those who believe what the ecumenical creeds teach, but refuse to confess the texts of those creeds? There are erring Protestants who denounce the use of creeds. Such Christians misapply the principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) to mean that manmade texts such as the ecumenical creeds cannot

possess any authority even though they faithfully teach what is contained in Holy Scripture. This attitude finds expression in such slogans as “No creed but Christ” and “Deeds, not creeds.” Nevertheless, such Christians, as long as they worship the triune God, whose Son is incarnate in Christ, do believe, teach, and confess the substance of the faith expressed in the very creeds whose use they reject. Their God is the God confessed in the creeds. In this way, the ecumenical creeds belong to them too, just as they belong to the apostles and to the first generations of Christians who did not yet have the text of the creeds in the forms in which we have inherited them, and yet confessed the substance of those creeds even to the point of death.

As for us, we in the Lutheran Church boldly and publicly embrace the ecumenical creeds as definitive expressions of our common faith. The creeds accurately and faithfully confess who our God is. Originally, our forebears in the Reformation formally adopted the ecumenical creeds to show that they were historic Christians. Their Roman Catholic opponents had accused the first Lutherans of departing from the historic faith of Christ, but the Lutherans showed that they are in continuity with the Church that Jesus Christ established on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Ephesians 2:19-20). The first Lutherans confessed the ecumenical creeds as their own. Therefore (contrary to the claims of their Roman Catholic opponents) they were not pagans, Muslims, or Jews, who rejected God in Christ, nor were they heretics, who perverted the teaching of Christ. No, the first Lutherans were Christians, just as truly as any other church body that confesses the ecumenical creeds.

In this way, the ecumenical creeds show what we are rather than what we are not. They show that we are a part of global Christendom, a part of the full number of those who live by faith in the Son of God and are thus destined for eternal life. That means that the creeds are different from other documents that are important in our Lutheran Church, such as the

Augsburg Confession and the other Lutheran Confessions. These confessions of faith set out not only our points of agreement with other Christians, but also and especially our important differences. They identify us as those who worship the same God as other Christians, and yet believe different things about what He does for us. Our Lutheran Confessions show that we differ from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches on, for example, the issue of justification by grace alone through faith alone, and that we differ from other Protestants on issues such as baptismal regeneration and the true and substantial presence of Jesus' body and blood under the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

The ecumenical creeds, on the other hand, reveal our fundamental unity with these erring fellowships. We may not believe all of the same things. Our differences may be so great, in fact, that we in the Lutheran church have to heed St. Paul's admonition to "mark and avoid" those who teach "contrary to the doctrine you have been taught" (Romans 16:17), thus breaking off communion fellowship. And yet, though we are not visibly united in one fellowship, nevertheless we share a common saving faith, a faith that has been common to all Christians from the days of the apostles until now: the faith taught in the ecumenical creeds. As one universal Church, we worship the one triune God, and we worship one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ. That is what makes us Christians, and that is why the ecumenical creeds are our creeds. †

# Knowing Jesus

## WHY WE NEED THE CREEDS

Pastor Sean Hansen

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**W**hy should we confess the creeds? Because they tell us who our God is. Why are the creeds important? Because we worship a real God about whom some things are true and other things are false. For 2,000 years, the Church has expressed what she believes by using creeds. As Lutherans, we accept and use three creeds. These are the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed. They are called the ecumenical creeds because they are used not only by Lutherans, but by Christians throughout the world.

But not everyone is accepting of these creeds. Some may see them as stifling. They may say things like, "I don't want to worry about all this doctrine; I just want to know Jesus." The feeling behind this statement may be a sincere desire to know our Lord and rejoice in His love, but it is misguided. The God we worship is a real God. He actually exists and so what we know (or think we know) about Him can be true or false.

If you want to have a good relationship with a friend or a husband or wife, that relationship needs to be built on truth. If you maintain a false image of who that person is, the relationship will weaken and

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Pastor Sean Hansen is pastor of St. Paul  
Lutheran Church, Mount Vernon, IA

eventually be destroyed. The same thing is true when it comes to our relationship – "communion" to use the language of the Church – with God. This relationship, this communion, needs to be based on truth. That means we need to speak about doctrine. And this doctrine, this teaching, needs to come from Bible which is God's own Word to us. This is what the creeds do: they express the true doctrine of the Bible.

But others may object saying something like, "We have no creed but the Bible. Or "We have no creed but Jesus." These objections create a false dilemma. The choice is not between the creeds or the Bible or between the creeds or Jesus. A creed is simply the way that we speak about Jesus. It is a summary of what is in the Bible. Ironically, if you investigate the websites or brochures of those who say "We have no creed but the Bible," you will likely find a section entitled "What we believe." That's a creed.

If you want to correctly know Jesus and the Bible, then creeds are actually helpful. The Bible is not simply a neutral book to which you are free to bring your own interpretation. On many occasions, Jesus taught that the correct interpretation of the Bible is the one that finds Him. He told the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me." (John 5:39) And the entire last chapter of Luke

is focused on Jesus teaching His disciples that His death and resurrection is taught by the entire Old Testament. The whole Bible, even Leviticus and the Song of Solomon, is about Jesus.

Some might then say, “These reasons you’ve given demonstrate why the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds are good creeds to confess. But why use these three and not others? Why can’t we just come up with our own statements of belief that say the same thing?” The most basic answer is that the Christian faith is not a matter of personal opinion. We confess these ecumenical creeds because our faith is catholic. The word “catholic”<sup>1</sup> is the Church’s term that means our faith does not belong to us individually. Rather, our faith is the gift of the God that we receive when we are brought into the Church. When we confess the ecumenical creeds, we are agreeing with and confessing the one true faith of Christ’s Church.

Innovation is not a good thing in theology. Our Lutheran forefathers were adamant that they did not intend to say anything new:

In conclusion, to repeat once again for the last time, we are minded not to manufacture anything new through this work of concord nor to depart in either substance or expression to the smallest degree from the divine truth, acknowledged and professed at one time by our blessed predecessors and us, as based upon the prophetic and apostolic Scripture and comprehended in the three Creeds. (Introduction to the Book of Concord)

Nothing in the Book of Concord<sup>2</sup> is meant to improvise or invent beliefs. It is simply a faithful handing on of the apostolic faith and teaching, which is

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<sup>1</sup>The word “catholic” (when capitalized) is sometimes used to refer to Roman Catholics. That is not its historic meaning in the Church. In the Athanasian Creed, for example, the word “catholic” is used in reference to the faith of the Church, not particularly to those connected with the Pope in Rome.

<sup>2</sup>The Book of Concord contains the Lutheran Church’s confession of faith.

itself a faithful handing on of what the apostles received from Jesus. In fact, Jesus Himself claims to do nothing other than speak what the Father gives Him. (John 12:49-50)

But this does not mean that the creeds are just about looking back into the past. The creeds do not simply tell us interesting facts about God. They do not even just tell us about the God “up there.” Most of all, the creeds are important to confess because they are a description of the One who is on the altar. They are a true description of the God with whom we have real, present communion in the Lord’s Supper.

So the creeds are directly important to you. When you participate together as the Church in the one body and one cup, you are participating in the body and blood of the Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity, born of the Virgin Mary. You are communing in the Lord who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. You are living in the Christ who rose from the dead on the third day and ascended into heaven. The creeds describe your salvation and entrance into eternal life in Christ.

In his first epistle, St. John urges us: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.” (1 John 4:1-3a, NKJV) The goal of the devil and his minions is to lead us away from the Son of God come in the flesh. It does not matter what else we believe, if we do not confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come in the flesh, then we do not have the Spirit of God. By speaking the truth about God, the creeds guard us against false prophets and the spirits that are not of God.

So why are the creeds important? Why confess the creeds? Because that’s what Christians do. We believe and speak the truth that God reveals to us together with all the saints, as we live in the flesh and blood of the Son of God. †

# BOOK REVIEWS

***Great Commission, Great Confusion, or Great Confession: The Mission of the Holy Christian Church.* By Lucas Woodford. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012. 232 pages.**

Lucas Woodford, Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Mayer, MN, has written a very fine book that I believe would greatly benefit the congregations, circuits, and districts of our Synod. In a time when there is great confusion and panic about the mission of the church, Pastor Woodford offers tremendous clarity and comfort that is Biblical and faithful to the Lutheran Confessions.

We hear the word “missional” a lot these days, but everyone seems to have a different idea of what that means. With good intentions of reaching the lost, the North American church too often has latched on to the latest program, fad, organizational structure, or movement without considering the theological underpinnings. The life-giving proclamation of the Gospel often gets drowned out by the urgent cries to “obey the Great Commission.” The author claims that much of the confusion that has arisen in recent times is because of the pragmatism of the Church Growth movement and the hyper-spiritualized leanings of the Emergent/ Emerging Church movement. These movements are carefully analyzed in separate chapters. Woodford also provides a very helpful chapter on the postmodern culture in which we currently live. It helped me to “connect the dots” on where we are as a society today, why we think the way we do, and what opportunities we have to boldly confess Christ Jesus. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The final chapters of this book put it all together. A clearer confession of faith is what leads us to a clearer mission. Woodford concludes that the Third

Article of the Apostles’ Creed is sufficient to unite and mobilize congregations in mission. “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” We cannot by our own reason or strength make the church grow and thrive. God, however, working through His Word and Sacraments will accomplish what He desires. In the Divine Service, God’s people are “forgiven and freed, renewed and refreshed, disciplined and dispersed back out into their vocations.” (pg. 165) Church is often thought of only as a way to evangelize, but Woodford offers a different perspective. The formal worship service is the “wheel” that moves the church *out* into the world rather than trying to attract people *in* to it. The Church is about making saints, not about increasing numbers.

Both pastors and laypeople will enjoy this very readable book. It contains several personal stories, both tearful and joyful. I appreciate the author’s humor, honesty, and especially his call for greater fraternal and collegial dialogue within the church.

Rev. Peter Hoft

Park View Lutheran Church, Eldridge IA



# THE ATHANASIAN CREED FOR TODAY

Pastor Matthew Rueger

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The attention span of our technological world is shrinking more every year. It was not uncommon for sermons in Luther's day to last over an hour. Sixty years ago a preacher's sermon might be between thirty and forty five minutes; thirty years ago twenty minutes was common, and today most sermons go ten to fifteen minutes. Our world of quick sound bites and two second video images has created a culture that demands everything be done quickly.

In such a culture, a confession of faith like the Athanasian Creed, that occupies two pages in our hymnal (pg. 319-320) and may take three to four minutes to confess, seems out of date. On Trinity Sunday, when our congregation confesses this creed, my own children make groaning noises after church because it took so long. The length, coupled with the repetition of phrases, make this creed a difficult confession for modern American ears.

Yet, I believe the Athanasian Creed remains a great blessing for us as modern Christians, and is very useful in today's world. Its origin and purpose lend themselves to our modern situation.

The Athanasian Creed first appeared in the 500s A.D. during a time of great controversy. It was attributed to Athanasius (296-373 A.D.), bishop of Alexandria, who was a staunch defender of the faith. However, most scholars today do not believe

Athanasius actually wrote it. This creed does, however, give voice to vital truths for which Athanasius fought in his day. At a time when false teachings about the Trinity of God were common place, the Athanasian Creed explained the Trinity in clear and precise terms. There were also lingering controversies over the deity of Christ during this period. This creed helped put those controversies to rest by addressing the divine and human natures of Christ more thoroughly than either the Apostles' or the Nicene Creeds before it. In the 500s and for centuries after, it helped unite the Church around a common understanding of God and the grace He won for us through His Son.

To modern American ears, it might seem tedious to repeat phrases like:

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit; the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal, And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal. . . .

Yet, this level of detail is necessary to combat false teachings which would separate the Persons of the Trinity or make them unequal to each other. When this creed was written, a popular false doctrine was "Modalism" which claimed that there were not three actual Persons in the Godhead, but only one divine being who showed himself in three different ways. The Athanasian Creed combated this heresy definitively with these words:

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Pastor Matthew Rueger is pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in Hubbard, IA

So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God. So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord; and yet there are not three Lords, but one Lord.

It was necessary to go slowly and repeat such phrases because of the level of confusion about God. People needed a slow detailed confession of the truth to undo the damage done by the false teachers. A slow, unambiguous statement of who the Triune God is and how the divine and human natures are united in the Person of Christ was the only way these controversies could be quieted.

In our world, and sadly even within our own Synod, there is often a tendency to avoid defining terms too precisely. Our culture prefers “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies and “let’s agree to disagree” methods of resolving conflicts. But when it comes to the doctrines of God’s Holy Word, the approach of Holy Scripture is that we should “speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Different doctrines within the Church do more than create factions and infighting, they destroy souls. Those who reject the Trinity of God or the divine/human natures of Christ place their souls in danger of God’s eternal judgment. Words at the beginning and at the end of the Athanasian Creed state exactly what is at stake: “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic (Christian) faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.” And in case that wasn’t clear enough, there is another statement in the middle of the Creed that reminds us, “Therefore, whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity. But it is also necessary for everlasting salvation that one faithfully believe the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Souls are still being lost today because people do not know God rightly. The Jesus proclaimed from many pulpits is no longer the Jesus of Holy Scripture who is both God and man and who died to turn God’s anger at sin away from sinners like us. In some ways, our world today might even be more confused about our Triune God than the Church was when this creed first surfaced. The reason why we continue to need

the Athanasian Creed is that its approach of clearly defining terms, even if it takes a while to do so, is the only solution to the confusion.

The trend one sees in many churches, including in most non-denominational and “evangelical” churches, is to discard the creeds, especially the Athanasian Creed. Evangelical mega-churches and TV preachers purposely avoid the creeds, because they claim they exclude people from the congregation. The thinking is that not everybody agrees with what the creeds say about God and the Church should be as inclusive as possible. Less definition and less doctrine is thought to be a better sales technique which produces better numbers (and therefore more income), than precise biblical/creedal definitions. One’s feelings are more important than knowing who Jesus is or what He did to save us. Such is the logic driving many so-called Christian churches.

Michael Horton in his book, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, does an excellent job demonstrating how modern churches have abandoned historical biblical Christianity in favor of marketing techniques and warm, happy feelings. They still talk about Jesus, but they have redefined Him. He is not so much a Savior as He is a friend. He is not so much true God who became true man to bear our sin as He is an understanding companion of uncertain birth.

Because of this movement away from creedal definitions of God, many modern Christians unknowingly embrace the same ancient false teachings the Athanasian Creed was written to combat.

For instance, in 2007, *The Shack* was number one on the New York Times Bestseller list. It was embraced and marketed by the evangelical movement. Members of my congregation read it. Christians gushed about how meaningful it was and how well it portrayed God. What most didn’t realize is that the view of God expressed in *The Shack* was blatant Modalism, the very heresy the Athanasian Creed fought against. As stated above, Modalism is the belief there is one god who appears in three different modes of being. Sometimes he is god the father, other times he takes on the persona of the son, and other times the holy spirit. He isn’t One God in three Persons as the Athanasian Creed

so clearly states. He is one god who expresses himself in three ways. Modalism is not Christianity. It is a false belief that denies both the Trinity and the unique divine/human natures of Christ.

Yet, well intentioned Christians embraced a modalistic view of God with open arms because they simply didn't know any better. I would argue that if the Athanasian Creed was used more fewer people would be seduced by false teachings about God.

The Athanasian Creed is hard. It takes time to read. It seems tedious and unwieldy. But we have to get past our American love of the quick and easy. Eternal life is worth taking one's time and focusing one's mind on difficult thoughts. The devil wants nothing more than to confuse the vulnerable. Our historic creeds, especially the Athanasian Creed, help us stay grounded in the saving truths of our gracious God. †