

The Apostles' Creed (ca. 150–724)

In response to Gnosticism, Marcionism, and various other obvious heresies, the early church in Rome assembled the basic elements of a creedal catechism¹ that was the precursor to the *Apostles' Creed*.² The basic text is commonly referred to as the *Old Roman Symbol* that was formulated about the year AD 150.

The basic elements of the *Old Roman Symbol* were commonly recited as answers to questions put to those who were candidates for ritual baptism. The prescription for ritual baptism was to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which also comprise the three major divisions of the creed. (This was determined by speculation from the text of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19). As the neophyte would say, “I believe in God the Father,” the candidate would be immersed once. Subsequent immersions would follow the remaining two statements “I believe in Jesus Christ his Son,” and “I believe in the Holy Spirit.”³

The text of the earlier catechism was later modified and expanded to conform to the *Nicene Creed* of AD 325 and 381. However, the Latin text that underlies the *Apostles' Creed* that is in common use today only emerged still later in AD 710–724. As we can clearly see, the apostles did not write this text at all, but the creed sought to incorporate the combined teachings of all the apostles thus giving it its name. The text of this Latin creed translates into English as follows (the bracketed annotations are added clarifications of the text and are not found in the translation):

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, which was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended into hell [abode of the dead]; 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 hence He shall come to judge the quick [living] and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic [universal] church; the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”

We should note that there is no mention in this creed of God’s grace, as being the source of salvation, or of faith as being the means by which it is appropriated. That is largely because the very important Pauline doctrine of grace had already been submerged by the time the creed was reformulated, and partly because it was only intended to be a statement of belief concerning the Godhead. It was never intended to be a comprehensive text that extended into the doctrines of salvation. This creed, then, is not complete in defining the Christian faith in every respect.

It should also be noted that earlier versions of this creed that were in use until AD 390 did not contain the phrase “He descended into Hell (by interpretation 'abode of the dead')” nor did it contain the word “catholic.”⁴ This creed is still being widely used with minor variations in churches across denominational lines today to define what all Christians believe because when properly interpreted it contains only the essential doctrines of Christian faith aside from any denominational specifics. © Arthur J. Smith 2015

¹ A catechism is a series of questions with prescribed answers put to an individual to determine their position regarding the faith.

² It may well be that the basic three elements of this creed were being recited as early as AD 64 as a profession of faith centuries before the canon of Scripture was finalized.

³ Some of today's reformed faith are surprised to find the early church practicing baptism by immersion, but baptism by affusion did not come into common practice until the Roman church began baptizing infants at a later date. See the topic: *Modes of Ritual Baptism* and other related topics in *CRC Book II*, Chapter 15.3 of this work.

⁴ The origin of the word “catholic” as it is specifically used by the Roman Catholic Church is discussed within the broader topic of *Apostolic Succession* in the *CRC Book III*, Chapter, page 112