

Credo: “I Believe. . .”

Summary: Statements of belief unite Christians in their articulation of shared commitments. While the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed are two of the oldest and most universal creeds of the church, the process of articulating what it means to give one’s heart to Christ continues in the present.

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is its emphasis on a creed, a summary statement of faith. The Latin term *credo* is often translated today as “I believe” but its literal meaning is “I give my heart.” It is language of the heart, a profound expression of commitment, not simply a list of statements to which one gives intellectual assent. When the early church was being persecuted, commitment to the way of Christ was often dangerous, requiring true courage.

Creeds came into use as part of the rite of baptism. In this rite of initiation, a person would take off old clothes, put on new white baptismal clothing, and become a Christian by a ritual bath and the affirmation of commitment to the Christian faith. The *credo* or creed expressed that commitment. Among the oldest creeds of the church is the Apostles’ Creed, an early version of which was composed about 150 CE. Its present form starts with, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord...” Through baptism, one is spiritually “born again.” While the term “born-again” has acquired the resonance of a dramatic conversion in modern American Christianity, it has a much wider and older significance for the church. To be “born again” is what it means to be a baptized Christian.

Christians in the early church had to answer for themselves the question that Christ asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In the councils of the early church, leaders met to come to a common mind about their faith. The Council of Nicaea, called by the Emperor Constantine in 325 CE, was the most important of these early councils. In the previous centuries, some had proposed that Jesus Christ was not really human at all, but was God appearing to be human; others had proposed that he was not really divine, but only a human being. The early church rejected these views as it worked together to articulate its faith: that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. The council also worked to express the meaning of God as threefold, a trinity, encompassing three aspects or “persons”—the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. At Nicaea, the church articulated the complexity of the divine mystery:

that the one God is the transcendent Creator, the fully human Christ, and the indwelling energy, fire, and breath of the Spirit. In the decades following the council, this definition of Christian orthodoxy would come to be enshrined in what is today called the Nicene Creed. It describes Jesus Christ as “the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.”

While the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed are two of the oldest and most universal creeds of the church, the process of articulating what it means to give one’s heart to Christ continues in the present. New creeds are written in each era. For example, the United Church of Christ in the U.S. phrases its belief in Christ this way: “In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself.” In El Salvador, a group of Christians have affirmed their faith in Christ, tested in the fires of economic and political struggle: “We believe in Christ, crucified again and again in the suffering of the poor...”

Through the ages, there have been many doctrinal controversies, but the act of confessing one’s faith has remained constant. For Christians to say “I believe...” is not only an articulation of fundamental doctrines, but also a personal commitment to the way of Christ.