

# Christian Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms

Dennis Bratcher

**Creeds** (from the Latin *credo*, "I believe") are simple statements of what an individual, or more usually a group of people, believes about a particular topic. They most often define the foundational beliefs that provide the guiding principles for the group's existence. In the Christian Church, creeds, or **confessions** as they are sometimes called in later church history, are an attempt to summarize in formal statements the basic or essential beliefs of Christians or a group of Christians, what a particular group believes and teaches as truth. The first creeds of the Christian Church are called **ecumenical creeds** because they were decided upon in church councils that represented the entire church at the time before the church permanently split into Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman) factions in AD 1054. Later creeds, sometimes called **Articles of Religion** or **Articles of Faith**, reflect the diversity of the Christian tradition and tend to become more specialized expressions of particular doctrines for various groups.

Creeds are most often used in services of worship in which the entire congregation recites the creed as a confession of the Faith. Today, most Christian churches accept the ecumenical creeds and use them in worship to varying degrees. Some churches recite at least one of the creeds every Sunday, while some traditions make little use of them in regular services of worship. The tendency in modern non-liturgical churches is to summarize particular church doctrines in some form of "Articles of Faith," a series of statements that attempt to define important doctrines for particular groups, while reciting the creeds only at special times during the church year.

A **catechism** is related to a creed, in that it summarizes important beliefs. However, a catechism is intended as an instructional tool to be memorized or learned by new converts or children who are formally entering into communion with a group. It is usually much more detailed than creeds, and is most often in the form of questions and answers. Catechesis is usually conducted under the guidance of a teacher who explains the beliefs and corrects the students' responses.

Some church traditions also formulate **position statements** or **declarations** to address current events, to clarify certain aspects of doctrine that have become points of debate, or to call the church to some particular action or commitment. The Catholic tradition has a long history of issuing such position statements on various topics. These have gone by various names depending on the period in history and the relative importance and authority of the declaration. The position statements included here are from various church groups addressing contemporary issues, such as the Theological Declaration of Barmen from the Confessing Church in Germany in 1934 in response to the rise of Nazi Germany.