

The Creeds of the Christian Church

*Demonstrating that “Eternal Punishment”
was not an officially held belief until 500 AD*

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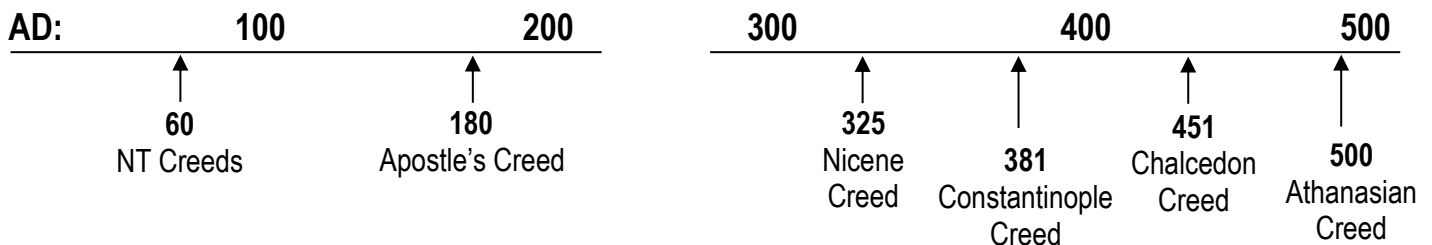
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Creeds are statements of faith describing what is officially held by a religion. Christianity has always had creeds in some form since its beginning in the New Testament (the writings by the followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection). The earliest and simplest NT creeds are found in the writings of the apostle Paul.

The early church that emerged after the era of the apostles of Jesus, also had creeds. The now famous *Apostle’s Creed* (The Old Roman Creed) is the earliest and best known. But it was not until after the *Edict of Milan* by Constantine (declaring Christianity to no longer be illegal) that the Christian Church (the Eastern and Western expressions, together) began to hold official Councils. In these councils, official creeds for the whole church were developed. There were seven great Councils held during the first millennium, but only the first four are presented here for the purpose of establishing at what point *Eternal Punishment*, was included in a creed.

The first four councils produced 3 creeds: Nicene, Constantinople, and Chalcedon (the Council at Ephesus did not produce a creed). None of these creeds included eternal punishment as a belief. It was not until 500 AD, in the Athanasian Creed that *Eternal Punishment* was introduced. This creed, however, was not a result of any of the seven great Councils, it was written some 100 years after Athanasius, and therefore not authored by him. It is often referred to as the “pseudo-Athanasian Creed”. So, to what degree it was considered “official’ by the church is in question. However, it has been adopted by many Christian organizations throughout church history.

The time chart below shows the creeds from these four earliest Councils, plus the Athanasian Creed, and the dates they were produced.



All of these Christian Church creeds are provided below in their fullness. In order to make it easy to confirm the introduction of eternal punishment into the creeds, all items dealing with salvation or eschatology (beliefs about the eternal state) are displayed in underlining below.

New Testament Creeds (55 AD)

1 Cor. 8:6: For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

1 Cor. 15:3-7: I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

1 Tim. 3:16: Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Apostle's Creed (180 AD)

I believe in God the Father who is almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell and on the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and in life everlasting.

Nicene Creed (325 AD)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father, by Whom all things came into being, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Who for us humanity and for our salvation came down from heaven,

was incarnate, was made human, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. By whom He took body, soul, and mind, and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance. He suffered, was crucified, was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, [and] sat at the right hand of the Father. He is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead; of His kingdom there is no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, in the uncreated and the perfect; Who spoke through the Law, prophets, and Gospels; Who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles, and lived in the saints. We believe also in only one, universal, apostolic, and holy church; in one baptism in repentance, for the remission and forgiveness of sins; and in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgement of souls and bodies, and the Kingdom of Heaven and in the everlasting* life.*

* The Greek word translated as “everlasting” is the word AIONIOS, which was also commonly used in the New Testament and means “age-long” or “indefinite time period”, and most likely “judgement in the age to come” was the intended meaning.

Constantinople Creed (381 AD)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us, humans, and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried. He rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. And in one holy universal and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Chalcedon Creed (451 AD)

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these

latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Athanasian Creed (AD 500)

Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity. Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation; that he also believe faithfully the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is

God and Man; God, of the Substance [Essence] of the Father; begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance [Essence] of his Mother, born in the world. Perfect God; and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who although he is God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ. One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by assumption of the Manhood into God. One altogether; not by confusion of Substance [Essence]; but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man; so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation; descended into hell; rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. At whose coming all men will rise again with their bodies; And shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.

Several observations are in order. First, the creeds of the Christian church became larger and more speculative in nature over the course of time in church history. The Apostle's Creed seems to be taken from creed-like statements in the New Testament writings of the Apostles of Jesus. The Nicene Creed is an expansion of the Apostle's Creed, with new items of belief and more detailed explanations (speculations) of existing beliefs. The Athanasian Creed was a much greater expansion with new speculations added, including eternal punishment. This was over 400 years after time of Jesus and his Apostles, and was a time in which the Roman Catholic (Western) Church was emerging into its period of monstrous brutality over people under Papal Authority. During these middle ages, eternal punishment was used as a weapon to control people through fear. Eternal Punishment is never found in the Old Testament, New Testament, or in the Early Christian Church which predominately believed God would eventually reconcile all things in heaven and earth to himself, in a re-creation whereby he "fills all in all" (completely fills all beings) and "brings everything in subjection to himself".

Restoration View in the Early Christian Church

The following thirty-one statements are the *Summary of Conclusions* at the end of J.W. Hanson's book titled *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years*. After looking into all of Hanson's thirty-one points, and finding them to be an accurate representation of Early Church History, I thought this list might prove itself to be very helpful for anyone wanting an overview of Universalism in the Early Church.

In order to make Hanson's conclusions easier to read and understand (since he wrote in the late 1800's), I took the liberty of paraphrasing what he wrote. But I tried to preserve his original wording and thoughts as much as possible. Please consult Hanson's original work for the exact wording. It is available as a free download on-line at:

<http://www.tentmaker.org/books/Prevailing.html#304>.

A few of the many points established previously in this book are summarized here:

(1) During the First Century the primitive Christians did not dwell on matters of eschatology, but devoted their attention to apologetics; they were chiefly anxious to establish the fact of Christ's Second Coming, and of its blessings to the world. It is possible that the subject of eternal destiny was left as an open issue in the Early Christian Church until Paganism and Judaism introduced erroneous ideas. But then, when the New Testament doctrine of the apokatastasis was asserted, universal restoration became an accepted belief as stated later by Clement and Origen in A.D. 180-230.

(2) The Catacombs give us the views of the unlearned early Christians. Not a syllable is found hinting at the horrors of Augustinianism (eternal punishment), but instead the inscription on every monument harmonizes with the Universalism of the early fathers.

(3) Clement of Alexandria declared that all punishment, however severe, has a purifying purpose, and that even the "torments of the damned" are a curing action by God. Origen explains that even Gehenna is a limited and curing kind of punishment. Origen was in agreement with all the other ancient Universalists, declaring that "aionion punishment", is consistent with universal salvation.

Therefore, the fact that other primitive Christians were less clear as to their meaning of this term (aionian punishment), does not prove that they believed that God's punishment was never-ending.

(4) Like our Lord and his Apostles, the Early Christians avoided words used by Pagans and Jews to define their view of never-ending punishment ("aidios" and "adialeipton timoria"). Instead, these Early Christians called punishment "kolasis aionios" which means discipline and chastisement of indefinite, but limited duration.

(5) The early Christians taught that Christ preached the Gospel to the dead, and that it was for that purpose that he descended into Hades. Many held that he released all who were in Hades when he went there. This shows that repentance beyond the grave and perpetual probation was accepted in those early days of the Christian Church, which by far precludes our modern-day error that the soul's destiny is decided upon death.

(6) Prayers for the dead were universal in the early church, which would be absurd if the condition of those who die is unalterably fixed at the grave.

(7) Some early Christian leaders used false threats of eternal punishment to keep the common people in check, and believed that the actual truth should be held and understood by only a "select few" who have special knowledge. And so, there is no doubt that many who seemed to teach endless punishment, really held the broader view of universalism, and only preached terrors of eternal damnation as a type of "crowd control".

(8) The first *somewhat complete* systematic statement of Christian doctrine given to the world was by Clement of Alexandria in A.D. 180, and universal salvation was clearly one of his positions.

(9) The first *complete* presentation of Christianity as a system was by Origen in A.D. 220, and universal salvation was explicitly presented in it.

(10) Universal salvation was the prevailing doctrine in Christendom as long as Greek (the language of the New Testament), was the language of Christianity.

(11) Universalism was believed by most Christians during the best centuries of Christianity (the first three). During this time, Christians were known mostly for simplicity, goodness, and missionary zeal.

(12) Universalism became least known and accepted in the Christian Church when Greek, (the language of the New Testament) was least known and used by the church. During this time, Latin became the official language of the Church when it became known for its darkest, most ignorant, and corrupt practices.

(13) Not a single writer, among those who describe the heresies in the Christian Church during the first three hundred years, ever lists Universalism as a heresy. And this was the time when Universalism was believed by the majority, and certainly by the greatest of the Early Church Fathers.

(14) Not a single creed during the first five-hundred years of the Christian Church ever expressed any position contrary to Universal Restoration. Nor did they ever express any position in favor of Eternal Punishment.

(15) With the exception of the arguments of Augustine (A.D. 420), there was never any arguments made against Universalism, for at least four hundred years after Christ, by any of the Early Church Fathers.

(16) While the great church councils that assembled in various parts of Christianity, "anathematized" (condemned) every kind of doctrine believed to be heretical, none of these councils, for more than five hundred years, ever condemned Universalism. Instead, Universalism was advocated in every century by the principal scholars and most revered saints.

(17) As late as A.D. 400, Jerome said that "most people" (plerique) believed in Universalism. And Augustine complained that "very many" (quam plurimi), believed it. This low number of adherents was in spite of the tremendous (and growing) influence of Augustine, and also in spite of the mighty power of the semi-pagan secular forces in the church that were aligned against it.

(18) The principal ancient Universalists were Christian born and reared, and were among the most scholarly and Godly of all the ancient believers.

(19) The most celebrated of the earlier advocates of endless punishment were heathen born and led corrupt lives in their youth. Tertullian one of the first, and Augustine, the greatest of them, both confessed to having been among the vilest before becoming Christians.

(20) The first advocates of endless punishment, Minucius Felix, Tertullian and Augustine, were Latins, ignorant of Greek, and less competent to interpret the meaning of Greek New Testament than were the Greek scholars who were the majority.

(21) The first advocates of Universalism, immediately after the Apostles, were Greeks who read and studied the New Testament writing in the Greek language – in which the New Testament was written. They found their Universalism in the Greek New Testament. Who would we expect to be correct, those who studied the New Testament in Greek or in a Latin translation?

(22) The Greek Fathers announced the great truth of universal restoration in an age of darkness, sin and corruption. There was nothing to suggest universalism to them in the pagan literature or religions of that day. Universalism was completely contrary to everything around them. Where else could they have found universalism but in the Gospel message of the New Testament?

(23) All ecclesiastical historians, and many Biblical critics and scholars, agree to the prevalence of Universalism in the earlier centuries.

(24) From the days of Clement of Alexandria to those of Gregory of Nyssa and Theodore of Mopsuestia (A.D. 180-428), the great theologians and teachers, almost without exception, were Universalists. There was no one, equal in number in the same centuries, that were comparable to them for learning and goodness.

(25) The first theological school in Christendom, the great one established in Alexandria, taught Universalism for more than two hundred years.

(26) In all Christendom, from A.D. 170 to 430, there were six Christian schools. Of these, four schools taught Universalism and only one taught Eternal Punishment.

(27) The three earliest Gnostic sects, the Basilidians, the Carpocratians and the Valentinians (A.D. 117-132) were condemned by Christian writers and their

heresies pointed out clearly. But though they taught Universalism, that doctrine is never condemned by those who oppose them. For example, Irenaeus condemned the errors of the Carpocratians, but does not reprehend their Universalism, though he clearly ascribes the doctrine to them.

(28) The first defense of Christianity against Infidelity (Origen against Celsus) puts the defense on Universalistic grounds. Celsus charged the Christians' God with cruelty, because he punished with fire. Origen replied that God's fire is curative and that he is a "Consuming Fire," because he consumes sin and not the sinner.

(29) Origen, the chief representative of Universalism in the ancient centuries, was bitterly opposed and condemned for various heresies by ignorant and cruel fanatics. He was accused of opposing Episcopacy (government of a church by bishops) because he believed in the pre-existence of the soul, etc. But he never was condemned for his Universalism! The very council that anathematized (condemned) "Origenism" esteemed highly Gregory of Nyssa, who was clearly a Universalist just like Origen. Lists of Origen's errors are given by Methodius, Pamphilus and Eusebius, Marcellus, Eustathius and Jerome, but Universalism is never named by any one of his opponents. For example, Hippolytus (A.D. 320) names thirty-two known heresies, but Universalism is not mentioned as among them. Epiphanius, (known as "the hammer of heretics,") describes eighty heresies ... but he never mentions universal salvation. All such silence about condemning Universalism happened at a time when, Gregory of Nyssa, an outspoken Universalist, was known as the most conspicuous figure in Christendom.

(30) Justinian, a half-pagan emperor who attempted to have Universalism officially condemned, lived in the most corrupt epoch of the Christian centuries. He closed the theological schools and demanded the condemnation of Universalism by law. But the doctrine was so prevalent in the church that the Second Council of Constantinople (held under Justinian's ruling authority) refused to obey his edict to suppress Universalism. Some historians view the "age of Justinian rule" as the worst form of rule civilization has produced.

(31) As a final conclusion, it is safe to say that the first clear and definite statement of human destiny by any Christian writer (after the days of the Apostles) includes universal restoration, and that doctrine was advocated by most of the greatest and best of the Christian Fathers for the first five hundred years of the Christian Era.

Any careful study of the early history of the Christian religion will show that the doctrine of universal restoration was least prevalent in the darkest, and prevailed most in the most enlightened era of the earliest centuries. It was the prevailing doctrine in the Primitive Christian Church.

Keep in mind that the above list is only Hanson's conclusions. To see what he bases his conclusions on and evaluate the validity of them, examine his book more carefully. But you must also keep in mind that even the evidence given in his book (based on the reference he provides) must also be verified – if you want to know if what he claims is actually true.

So, ideally, as time allows, you should look into all his resources and references that he provides and make sure that: (1) such references actually exist, (2) that he has not quoted his references “out of their context” (and many times, people in their zeal do this without realizing it ... but it is invalid information just the same), or (3) has misunderstood, or illogically concluded something from a referenced source.

When I first read Hanson's work (and it was one of the earliest resources I encountered on Universalism in Early Christian Church history), I was very skeptical and assumed that he was exaggerating (at best) or was dishonest (at worst). But I was intrigued by the general claim he was making that Universalism prevailed in the Christian Church for the first 500 years, thinking that I could not possibly have missed this after seminary training and thirty-five years of personal study. But I also figured that a claim like Hanson's is so over-the-top extreme that it would be easy to disprove. I expected to have some fun in the process. But as I looked into his claims and went to the primary sources (the actual writings of the Early Greek Church Fathers) that he referred to, I quickly discovered that, with very few exceptions, Mr. J.W. Hanson – a nineteenth century Universalist scholar – was a very reliable source on this subject of which he wrote!

About the Author

Carl Jones is a retired Sr. Technical Writer living in Grass Valley, California. Prior to this he was a Hardware/Software Engineer for thirty years, He has been married 45 years to the only true love of his life. He has two adult children and one beautiful grand-daughter, all of whom he loves more than life itself.

Carl earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering (1979) at California State University in Sacramento, California. He earned a California Community College Life Teaching Credential in 1984 and has taught technology classes at two California colleges. He also graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a Certificate of Graduate Studies in 2010. Carl has studied in the Masters of History program at American Public University in W. Virginia.

Carl is an Army veteran and served in Viet Nam in 1970. He has lived in Sacramento, CA; Eatontown NJ; Grand Rapids, MI; Dallas, TX; Beaverton, OR; and Nevada City, CA. He has made two trips to China (Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing); one trip to Bangkok, Thailand; and one trip to England (Loughborough and London).

Carl also plays music publicly, and in about a dozen assisted living centers in Grass Valley.