

The Creeds Are Philosophical Corruption of Christianity: A Latter-day Saint Defense

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

The ecumenical creeds — Nicene (325 AD), Constantinopolitan (381 AD), Chalcedonian (451 AD), and Athanasian (date disputed) — are often presented as the nonnegotiable baseline of Christian identity. To reject the creeds, critics say, is to reject Christianity itself. Latter-day Saints have long maintained that these creeds represent a departure from original apostolic teaching, incorporating Greek philosophical categories foreign to the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the New Testament witness. Counter-critics, including some sympathetic to LDS concerns, argue that the creeds faithfully preserved apostolic teaching in new vocabulary demanded by new controversies. This document examines whether the creeds represent philosophical innovation or authentic doctrinal preservation.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of the pro-creedal argument runs as follows: Doctrinal development does not equal doctrinal corruption. The apostles taught the full divinity of Christ, His distinction from the Father, and the unity of the Godhead. When heresies arose — Arianism denying Christ's divinity, Sabellianism collapsing the persons — the church needed precise language to defend what was always believed. Greek philosophical terms like *ousia* (substance/being) and *hypostasis* (person/subsistence) were tools used to articulate biblical truths, not to replace them. Just as modern Christians use the word "Trinity" (absent from scripture) without corrupting the faith, the councils used philosophical vocabulary to guard apostolic content. The creeds are not philosophy imposed on scripture but scripture defended with philosophical precision. Rejecting them risks reviving the very heresies they were designed to exclude.

This is a thoughtful argument. It deserves careful examination.

3. Biblical Response

The New Testament Does Not Speak in Creedal Categories

The Nicene Creed describes the Son as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father." None of this language appears in scripture. The word *homoousios* is entirely absent from the biblical text. It was, in fact, a term with a

contested history — it had been condemned at the Council of Antioch in 268 AD when used by Paul of Samosata, and many bishops at Nicaea itself were uncomfortable with it.

The biblical writers describe God's nature in relational, functional, and covenantal terms — not in the categories of Greek ontology. Consider the contrast:

- **Biblical language:** "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand" (John 3:35). This is personal, relational, and intelligible.
- **Creedal language:** "Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." This is metaphysical, abstract, and requires a philosophical framework to interpret.

The claim that the creeds merely restated biblical content in new words assumes that the philosophical framework was neutral — a transparent vessel carrying unchanged meaning. But philosophical categories are never neutral. They carry assumptions. The category of *ousia* (substance/being) imported the assumption that the most fundamental question about God is *what He is made of* — a question the biblical writers never asked. Hebrew thought asked who God is, what He does, and what He commands. The shift from relational theology to substance metaphysics was not a neutral translation. It was a transformation of the conceptual framework.

Jesus Warned Against Human Traditions

Jesus Himself drew a sharp line between the commandments of God and the traditions of men:

ABSTRACT

"This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."
(Matthew 15:8-9)

"Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition." (Mark 7:9)

These warnings were originally directed at Pharisaic additions to the Law, but the principle is universal: human philosophical elaborations, however well-intentioned, do not carry the authority of divine revelation. The creeds were products of ecclesiastical councils, not prophetic revelation. No biblical writer anticipated or endorsed them. No angel delivered them. No voice from heaven confirmed them.

The Apostles Preached a Simple Gospel

The earliest Christian confessions in the New Testament are strikingly simple:

- "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3)
- "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 16:16, John 20:31)
- "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5)

None of these require or imply the metaphysical apparatus of Nicaea. The apostolic gospel was about the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, His death and resurrection, and His coming kingdom

— not about His ontological substance relative to the Father. Paul explicitly warned against "philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

4. Early Christian Evidence

Pre-Nicene Christianity Was Not Creedal

The earliest Christian writers held diverse views about the relationship between Father and Son, and none of them articulated the Nicene formula.

The Didache (c. 50-120 AD) contains baptismal instructions invoking Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (7:1-3) but offers no metaphysical explanation of their relationship. The formula is liturgical, not philosophical.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110 AD) wrote of Christ as "our God" and distinguished Him from the Father, but used no substance language. His theology was doxological and pastoral, not metaphysical.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD) described the Son as "another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things" (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 56). He explicitly used the Platonic concept of the *Logos* to explain Christ to pagan audiences, acknowledging the philosophical bridge he was building. His understanding was subordinationist — the Son was divine but secondary to the Father — which the Nicene Creed would later reject.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) was deeply influenced by Platonic philosophy and described the Christian God in terms drawn from Middle Platonism. He saw Greek philosophy as a "schoolmaster" preparing the Greeks for the gospel (*Stromata*, 1.5), explicitly acknowledging the synthesis he was constructing.

Origen (c. 185-254 AD) was the most philosophically sophisticated of the pre-Nicene theologians. He taught the eternal generation of the Son but also clear subordination: "We say that the Savior and the Holy Spirit exceed all creatures without possible comparison, in a wholly transcendent way, but that they are exceeded by the Father" (*Commentary on John*, 13.25). His views were later partially condemned — evidence that the pre-Nicene consensus was not the Nicene consensus.

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD) coined the Latin word *trinitas* and spoke of three *personae* sharing one *substantia*. But his understanding was economic and subordinationist: "The Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole" (*Against Praxeas*, 9). He also famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church?" (*Prescription Against Heretics*, 7) — recognizing the danger of philosophical corruption even as he participated in it.

The Council of Nicaea Was Political as Much as Theological

Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD not primarily out of theological concern but to achieve political unity in a fractured empire. He presided over the council despite not being baptized. The *homoousios* formula may have been suggested by Constantine himself or his theological advisors (Eusebius of Caesarea reports this). The creed was enforced by imperial authority, and dissenting bishops were exiled.

The decades following Nicaea saw the "Arian" position (or semi-Arian *homoiousios* — "of similar substance") gain majority support at multiple councils. Emperor Constantius II favored the Arian position and exiled Athanasius, the champion of Nicaea, five times. Jerome later remarked that "the whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian" (*Dialogue Against the Luciferians*, 19). The eventual triumph of Nicene orthodoxy owed as much to imperial politics — particularly Emperor Theodosius I's Edict of Thessalonica (380 AD) — as to theological argument.

The Philosophical Sources Are Traceable

The specific philosophical influences on creedal theology are well documented:

- **Platonic influence:** The concept of an immaterial, impassible, timeless God comes from Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic*, not from the Hebrew Bible. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob walks in gardens (Genesis 3:8), speaks face to face (Exodus 33:11), and shows His back (Exodus 33:23). The God of the creeds cannot do any of these things.
- **Aristotelian influence:** The categories of substance (*ousia*) and accident, essential and contingent properties, shaped how the councils formulated the relationship between the persons of the Godhead.
- **Neoplatonic influence:** The concept of divine simplicity — that God has no parts, no composition, and that His attributes are identical with His being — entered Christian theology through Augustine's engagement with Plotinus and Porphyry.

As historian R.P.C. Hanson concluded: "The creed of Nicaea was a new formula which owed nothing to any existing creed... [it] was a *novum* in the history of Christian doctrine" (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 163).

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

1. **The creeds are products of the post-apostolic period** and represent unauthorized philosophical speculation rather than prophetic revelation (see Joseph Smith—History 1:19).
2. **The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three distinct beings** united in purpose, will, and glory (Articles of Faith 1:1; D&C 130:22).
3. **The nature of God is known through revelation, not philosophy.** Joseph Smith's First Vision (1820) restored the knowledge that the Father and the Son are distinct, embodied, glorified beings — a knowledge that the creeds had obscured.
4. **The simplicity of the apostolic gospel was corrupted** by the introduction of Greek metaphysical categories, fulfilling the prophesied apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:3; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Timothy 4:3-4).

5. **The Restoration recovered what was lost**, not through philosophical argument but through direct divine revelation: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost" (Articles of Faith 1:1).

As the LDS Bible Dictionary states: "The true doctrine of the Godhead was lost in the apostasy that followed the ministry of the Apostles, and it was not recovered until the Father and the Son appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith in the spring of 1820."

6. Key Scriptures

- **Matthew 15:8-9** — Teaching for doctrines the commandments of men
- **Mark 7:9** — Rejecting God's command to keep human tradition
- **Colossians 2:8** — Warning against philosophy and vain deceit
- **1 Timothy 2:5** — One God, one mediator, the man Christ Jesus
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen sees the Father and Son as distinct beings
- **Matthew 3:16-17** — Three distinct divine manifestations at the baptism
- **John 17:3** — The Father is "the only true God" and Jesus is "sent"
- **John 17:11, 21-22** — The oneness of Father and Son is the same oneness believers should have
- **2 Thessalonians 2:3** — The prophesied falling away
- **Acts 20:29-30** — Grievous wolves entering after the apostles' departure
- **2 Timothy 4:3-4** — Turning from truth to fables
- **D&C 130:22** — The Father and Son have bodies of flesh and bone
- **Joseph Smith—History 1:19** — The creeds are "an abomination"

7. Responses to Common Objections

"The creeds used philosophy as a tool, not a replacement for biblical truth."

Tools shape the product. When the categories of Greek substance metaphysics became the framework for understanding God, the resulting theology was necessarily shaped by those categories. The question is not whether philosophy was used, but whether the philosophical framework distorted the biblical message. The shift from a personal, relational, embodied God to an immaterial, impassible, simple divine substance is not a neutral translation — it is a fundamental reconceptualization. See [FairLatterdaySaints: Creeds](#).

"Without the creeds, Christianity would have fallen into heresy."

This assumes the only options are Nicene orthodoxy or Arianism. Latter-day Saints propose a third option: the original apostolic understanding, in which the Father and Son are distinct divine beings — fully divine, fully united, and fully distinct. This position was represented among early Christians (Justin Martyr, for example) but was excluded by the binary of the 4th-century debates.

"Every Christian body has affirmed the creeds for nearly 2,000 years."

This is historically inaccurate. The creeds were contested for decades after Nicaea. They were never accepted by many Eastern churches (the Church of the East rejected Chalcedon and still does). And the argument from universal consent is circular: groups are defined as "Christian" by credal acceptance, and then the creeds are defended by the claim that "all Christians" accept them.

"Joseph Smith was unqualified to judge the creeds."

The claim is not that Joseph Smith judged the creeds by his own learning. The claim is that God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him and declared that the creeds were not correct. If the First Vision occurred, the authority behind the judgment is divine, not human. The question is whether the vision happened, not whether Joseph Smith had a seminary degree. See [Church of Jesus Christ: First Vision Accounts](#).

"Doctrinal development is natural and healthy — it doesn't mean corruption."

There is a difference between development (drawing out implications already present in the original teaching) and innovation (introducing foreign categories that reshape the teaching). The introduction of *homoousios*, divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness represents innovation, not development. These concepts are absent from the biblical text and are traceable to specific philosophical sources. See [FairLatterdaySaints: Apostasy](#).

8. Conclusion

The ecumenical creeds are not the standard of Christianity. They are the product of a specific historical process in which Greek philosophical categories were imposed on biblical revelation, often under political pressure, to resolve debates that the apostles never anticipated resolving in those terms. The Latter-day Saint position is not anti-intellectual or anti-historical. It is a principled insistence that the nature of God must be known through revelation, not philosophical speculation — and that such revelation has been restored through the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. The simplicity of the apostolic confession — that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, distinct from the Father, united in purpose and glory — needs no philosophical overlay. It stands on its own.