

Notes for Congregationalism and Orthodox Denominations

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Jeff Fuqua, presenter

Congregationalism

- Congregational churches are so named because each local congregation has full authority.
- They began when people escaped persecution from the religious authorities in England and wanted to purify the church in worship and style of government.
- 1620 many set sail for the Americas and some on the Mayflower.
- Jonathan Edwards was an important influence and had a leading role in the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s.
- They suffered a theological split debating the Trinity. Conservatives keeping the same beliefs and liberals moving toward a Unitarian belief that ultimate authority is not the voice of the past as revealed in Scripture but the “living voice” of experience and reason. In other words, whatever you want to believe. Some of those churches do not call themselves Congregationalists but are known as Universalists and there is also the United Church of Christ. Not to be confused with the Churches of Christ.
- Most Puritans of the past have declined and there are more liberal Unitarians today. Some of the conservative branches are known as Evangelical Free Church of America and Evangelical Covenant Church.
- Although traditional Puritan, Congregationalists have maintained steady growth through the years and have made a significant contribution to society.
- The conservative bodies view scripture as inerrant Word of God.
- People are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ, who died for their sins. Good works are the result of their faith.
- Souls of believers go immediately to be with Christ. At Christ’s return their earthly bodies are raised to immortality. The wicked will suffer eternal punishment in hell.
- They may practice infant or believer’s baptism, or both. Sacraments, Lord’s Supper, are symbols of spiritual realities.

The Orthodox Church

One of the three major branches of Christianity. This includes the national churches of Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, Serbia, Greece, and Cyprus.

Orthodox meaning:

Among orthodox believers it has two meanings.

- 1) "True Glory" _____
- 2) "True Doctrine" of "Straight Teaching" _____

The writings of the Greek Fathers of the first four centuries are a part of tradition and therefore are as authoritative as the Bible.

In 1054 after many years of disagreements over doctrine and major language differences the church split into two groups mainly following the division of the Roman Empire.

The main doctrinal difference was the addition of "and the son" (filioque) to the Nicene Creed.

Historical Introduction of the Nicene Creed (for reading later)

The Nicene Creed is professed every Sunday at Mass in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church. In the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church and in our separated Orthodox brethren, this same Creed is professed in its original formulation.

The only difference between the Creed of the East and West is the later addition of the phrase "and the Son" to the paragraph on the procession of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, this disagreement has caused great difficulty and division between Eastern and Western Christianity.

The Nicene Creed arose from the first two ecumenical councils of the Church. The first ecumenical council is the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. and the second is the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. This Creed is ancient, and it has preserved the faithful from a variety of heresies for over 1,600 years.

Walking through the Nicene Creed (From the National Catholic Register)

Note: This is from a Catholic perspective

Paragraph 1 – God the Father

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

We believe in one God in three Persons. We do not believe in three gods. Our one God is not only our king and Lord, but He is also our Heavenly Father. We are His children. He created everything that we can see, but He also created all the things that we cannot see. For example, we believe in the angels, in our own souls, and in the demons. God is Lord over all of it and has all might.

Even though He is tremendously powerful, our God and Father draws us into a relationship with Him and invites us to share eternal blessedness in another invisible reality: Heaven.

Paragraph 2 – The Lord Jesus

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;

through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven,

The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is the Word of God, the Son. This Word of God, Jesus Christ, proceeds from the Father. He was “born” and “begotten” but not made. This is a mystery that is very difficult to understand. Much ink has been spilled in theology on how Jesus can be both God and man.

In other words, Jesus is fully God and He is eternal, just as the Father is eternal. This paragraph emphasizes that there is one God, but the Father is nonetheless distinct as a Person from the Person of the Son.

The Council Fathers went to great length to combat the Arian heresy which claimed that Jesus was created and was not truly God. We believe that Jesus is fully God and fully man. As the Word of God, He had existed forever and will always exist. He proceeds from the Father as God from God and Light from Light, true God from true God. I will go into more detail on this in the fifth paragraph on the Holy Spirit.

There is also the realization that it is through the Word of God that all things were made. God reveals to us in Genesis God speaks to create. He says, “Let there be light.” And there was light. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was sent on a mission by the Father to come down from heaven to redeem humanity and offer us salvation.

Paragraph 3 – The Incarnation and The Virgin Mary

and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

By the free choice of Mary, our Mother, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God took on flesh. Jesus Christ, the uncreated Word through which all things were made, condescended to share in our humanity. The almighty God emptied Himself and took on the form of a slave, to use the language of St. Paul.

In the Latin Rite, there is a tradition of bowing during this paragraph in honor of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is literally the “enfleshment” of Jesus; it is what we celebrate at Christmas. This paragraph marks one of the most important moments in human history. Our God became one of us.

Paragraph 4 – The Paschal Mystery

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried,

and 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.

This paragraph is directly connected to the previous. Jesus became man to accomplish the work of our salvation. It was for us that Jesus was crucified. The Council Fathers include, “under Pontius Pilate” to show that this was a historical reality. It really happened. So too, Jesus truly rose from the dead on the third day after being buried.

Forty days after rising from the dead, He lifted Himself up into Heaven in a mysterious fashion and He now reigns in Heaven as King at the right hand of the Father. We believe that He will come again in glory. This is what we call the Second Coming. At the second coming of Christ, we will all be judged; everything we have done will be laid bare and true justice will be accomplished.

This second coming will result in the passing away of the old Heaven and the old Earth and the establishing of Jesus' everlasting kingdom.

Paragraph 5 – The Holy Spirit

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one God in three Persons. The third Person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, who we also rightly call Lord and the giver of life. God breathed life into the first man, after all. This holy breath of God is the Spirit which gives life and sustains life. He is glorified and loved as God, along with the Father and the Son. We believe that the Holy Spirit, preceding the Incarnation as well as after, inspired the prophets.

The Trinity is the mystery of God, as He is. It is difficult to wrap our minds around this mystery in any meaningful way. Our metaphors are usually material, like a three-leaf clover or the states of water as ice, liquid, or vapor, and because they are material, they always fall short. God is spiritual, not material. The best explanation I have heard of the Blessed Trinity is from St. Augustine's Analogy of the Mind. I will try my best to offer a simplified version. Though, it is far from simple.

In our own minds, we have intellect and will. We know things and act freely. When we learn or know things, we have a procession of intellect. When we act freely upon ourselves or the world, we have a procession of the will. If we analogously apply this understanding to the "mind of God," we see a procession of the intellect and a procession of the will. God is perfect and so these processions must be infinite and perfect.

The procession of the intellect, within the mind of God, is God the Father's perfect knowledge of Himself. This perfect image of Himself is the Son. The Son, in return, perfectly loves the Father. God is love. Therefore, the procession of His will is perfect love which proceeds as the love shared between the Father and the Son. This is the Holy Spirit. However, we must understand that He does not proceed in time, as He is as eternal as the Father and the Son.

Paragraph 6 – The Church

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The Church of Jesus Christ is His Mystical Body. Therefore, the Church is holy, even if the human beings who compromise it are not always holy. The Church is one because Christ is one. The Church is catholic because the Church is "universal." Catholic means universal. And the Church is apostolic because Christ founded it upon the Apostles.

We enter this Church through the one Baptism of Christ, by which we are cleansed of original sin, are grafted onto Christ, and become adopted sons and daughters of God.

We believe that when Christ comes again, we will be reunited with our bodies in a glorified way, like Christ's resurrected Body. We do not know exactly what this will look like.

And we look forward to the life of the world to come which is eternal blessedness in the company of the angels and the saints in constant praise and love of God. We will want nothing and all suffering will be no more.

Conclusion – Amen

Amen.

And finally... amen! Amen means “yes,” “so be it,” and “I believe.” It is the only ending to the Creed that we can offer as human beings. God has revealed all He is and all that He has done for us, and our confident and faithful “Amen” is the response of our heart.

Meaning of the Catholic Creed by the late Dr. Scott Hahn, professor of Theology, Franciscan University – National Catholic Register

What a Baptist leader had to say about the Nicene Creed.

“And I think the Nicene Creed, while generally is a very good creed and it’s certainly been accepted by many traditions,” Allen added, “there are still a couple issues of wording in that creed that could be interpreted to foment or to produce doctrines or concepts of doctrines that we as Baptists would reject.”

In an email to Church Leaders magazine, Allen said that he was referring to the phrase “one baptism for the remission of sins.”

“Though the language is directly from Scripture in Acts, the language was interpreted by many among the Church Fathers and by many today who use the creed to mean baptismal regeneration. Baptists would reject such an interpretation,” Allen said. “If that language is interpreted to mean that we are baptized ‘because of’ the forgiveness of sins, which is the meaning in the Greek New Testament I might add, then there is no problem with the statement.”

Dr. David Allen, dean of the Adrian Rogers Center for Preaching at Mid-America Baptist Seminary

Roman Catholicism vs. Eastern Orthodoxy: What’s the Difference?

Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity: Similarities and Differences

The “Filioque” clause has always been one of the most significant differences between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Catholicism teaches that the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ, sent the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox Church believes that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, not the Son.

Eastern Orthodox (Orthodox Catholic Church) Hierarchy

The largest regional group is the **Greek Orthodox Church**, which includes Greece, the Balkans, Albania, the Middle East, and the Greek diaspora in North America, Europe, and Australia.

The **Russian Orthodox Church** includes the former Soviet Union, China, and Japan (although the Orthodox Church in some former Soviet countries, like Ukraine, now consider themselves independent).

The **Oriental Orthodox Church** is separate from the Eastern Orthodox Church due to theological differences, although they have much in common.

The Eastern Orthodox church does not have one authority (like the Roman Pope) who has governing power over them. Each regional group has its own bishop and holy synod, which provides administrative leadership and preserves the practices and traditions of the Orthodox Church.

The **Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople** is the bishop of Constantinople, equal to all the other bishops and has the honorific title of *primus inter pares* (first among equals).

Roman Catholics consider the **Bishop of Rome (Pope)** as having **Papal Primacy** – all the cardinals, archbishops, and bishops give him respect as the supreme authority in church government and doctrine.

Comparisons of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Baptist Beliefs

How do they view scripture?

Catholic: The Scriptures, which teach without error the truth about salvation, must be interpreted within the church tradition. 46 OT books (7 are Apocrypha/deuterocanonical) and 27 NT books.

Orthodox: Scripture, without error in matters of faith, is to be interpreted by Sacred Tradition, especially the Ecumenical Councils (AD 325-787) Include 49 OT (3 more than Catholic) and 27 NT books.

Baptists: Scripture is inspired without error, the sole final totally trustworthy rule of faith. The standard 39 OT books and 27 NT books are accepted. Some more liberal groups have questioned the inerrancy of scripture.

How do they view God?

Catholic: Doctrines of Trinity are taught in creeds. God the Father and Jesus sent the Holy Spirit.

Orthodox: Doctrines of Trinity are taught in creeds. Only God the Father sent the Holy Spirit.

Baptists: Trinity is taught that God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit all exist as God in three persons and are fully God. Jesus was fully God and human.

How do they view Salvation?

Catholic: God imparts grace to people through the sacraments. So, through baptism you are saved but have to maintain through works and receiving the sacraments.

Orthodox: In Christ, God became human so that man might be deified, having the energy of God's life. Through baptism and church participation people receive the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection as they persevere.

Baptists: Saved by grace alone, through faith as a result of a belief in Jesus, who died for our sins.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has a mystical approach to grace, believing God's nature is distinct from His "energies" in the sense that the sun is distinct from the energy it produces. This distinction between the nature of God and His energies is fundamental to the Orthodox concept of grace.

Orthodox believe being "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) means that by grace we have union with God in His energies, but our nature does *not* become God's nature – our nature remains human.

Orthodox believe grace is the very energies of God Himself. Before baptism, God's grace moves a person toward good by external influence, while Satan is in the heart. After baptism, "baptismal grace" (the Holy Spirit) enters the heart, influencing from within, while the devil hovers outside.

Grace can work *upon* a person not baptized in the Orthodox church, as well as *within* a person who is baptized in the Orthodox church. They would say someone like Mother Theresa was deeply motivated by her love for God coming from the Spirit's external influence. Because she was not baptized in the Eastern Orthodox Church, they would say the Holy Spirit's grace was influencing her externally, not from within.

What happens after death?

Catholics: Souls of the faithful go to heaven either immediately or, if imperfectly purified in this life, after purgatory. The wicked go immediately to eternal punishment in hell.

Orthodox: Souls of the faithful are purified (process of growth, not punishment,) then get a foretaste of eternal blessing in heaven. The wicked get a foretaste of eternal torment in hell.

Baptists: Souls of believers go to be with Christ. At Christ's return, their bodies are raised to immortal eternal life. The wicked will suffer eternity in hell.

What is the church?

Catholics: The church is the mystical body of Christ, established by Christ and lead by its head, the Pope, who may infallibly pronounce dogma. It is united going back to the succession of bishops whose ordination goes back to the apostles – the only church founded by Christ and the continuing presence of Jesus on earth. The Fourth Lateran Council of AD 1215 declared, "There is one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation."

However, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) recognized that the Catholic church is "linked with" baptized Christians (Orthodox or Protestant), which they call "separated brethren," "though they do not profess the faith in its entirety." They consider the Eastern Orthodox Church members to be "imperfectly, though not fully", members of the Catholic Church.

Orthodox: The church is the Body of Christ in an unbroken historical connection to the apostles. Does not recognize the Pope as a supreme leader and has bishops at the head of each geographical national church.

Baptists: The universal church is the body of Christ, which consists of the redeemed throughout history. Local churches are autonomous congregations and are to be baptized believers. Church officers are usually pastors and deacons.

Confession

Roman Catholics go to their priest to confess sins and receive “absolution” or forgiveness of their sins. The priest will often assign a “penance” to help internalize repentance and forgiveness – such as repeating the “Hail Mary” prayer or doing kind acts for someone they sinned against. Confession and penance is a sacrament in the Catholic church, necessary for one to continue in the faith. Catholics are encouraged to go to confession often – if they die without confessing a “mortal sin,” they will go to hell.

Greek Orthodox also believe they need to confess their sins to God before a “spiritual guide” (usually a priest but can be any male or female carefully chosen and given a blessing to hear confessions). After confession, the repentant person will have the parish priest say the prayer of absolution over them. Sin is not considered a stain on the soul requiring punishment, but a mistake that provides opportunity to grow as a person and in the faith. Sometimes an act of penance is required, but it is meant to establish a deeper understanding of the mistake and how to cure it.

What are sacraments?

Catholic: Baptism removes original sin in infants. The Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) the substances are changed into the body and blood of Christ. (transubstantiation) Other sacraments are Confession, Confirmation, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders, Anointing the sick (last rites.)

Orthodox: Baptism initiates God’s life in infants and converts. In the Eucharist, bread and blood are changed into the blood and body of Christ which they call a mystery unexplained. Other sacraments are Chrismation, Confession, Marriage, Holy Orders, Anointing the Sick.

Note: Unlike in the Western churches, where confirmation is typically reserved to those of "the age of reason," chrismation in the Orthodox Church is normally administered immediately after baptism and immediately (or at least shortly) before one's first reception of Holy Communion.

Baptist: Baptism is the immersion of believers only as a symbol of their faith in Christ. The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic memorial of Christ’s death and anticipation of His return. Called ordinances instead of sacraments.

Other Notes

Catholic: Mary was conceived by her mother immaculately (free of original sin) remained a virgin perpetually, assumed bodily into heaven without dying. She is the Mother of the Church and an object of veneration (honor that should stop short of worship.) Priests must be celibate and unmarried men. Catholics have allowed Episcopal priests that are married to lead parishes. Icons are used.

Orthodox: Mary was cleansed of sin when Gabriel appeared to her, remained a virgin perpetually, and in tradition was assumed bodily into heaven. Icons are used in veneration.

Baptists: Most Baptists emphasize evangelism, missions, and education. Separation of church and state is a historic emphasis with most.

The Issues of Catholicism and Orthodox

1. Their teaching on salvation is unbiblical.

Both Catholics and Orthodox believe that salvation begins when a baby is baptized and is an ongoing process throughout one's life, requiring a person to follow the sacraments and do good works.

Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Romans 10:9-10 says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

2. Teachings of men equal authority with Holy Scripture.

Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox feel the Bible alone cannot provide certainty about all revealed truth, and that "Sacred Tradition" handed down by church leaders over the ages must be given equal authority.

"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Catholics and Orthodox have allowed tradition to take precedence over God's holy, inspired, and eternal Word.

Some say the venerating the icons and images of Mary and the saints, in direct disobedience to God's command: "Do not act corruptly and make a carved image for yourselves in the form of any figure, a representation of male or female" (Deuteronomy 4:16).

Why Become a Christian?

In short, your life – your eternal life – depends on becoming a true Christian. This begins with understanding we are all sinners deserving of death. Jesus died, taking our sins on His sinless body, taking our punishment. Jesus redeemed us from hell. He resurrected so we can have the hope of resurrection and immortality in His presence.

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9-10

Becoming a true Christian provides us with escape from hell and the firm assurance that we will go to heaven when we die. But there's so much more to experience as a true Christian!

As Christians, we experience indescribable joy walking in relationship with God. God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. God is for us! Nothing can separate us from the love of God! (Romans 8:36-39)

Why wait? Take that step right now! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!