

The Apostles' Creed Addressing the Confusing Language

The words “holy catholic church” of the Apostles' Creed are earlier than the existence of the Roman Catholic Church. The word “catholic” in the expression “holy catholic church” (ἁγίαν καθολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν) was not capitalized because it is a phonetic rendering of a Greek word (καθολικός, *katholikos* or *catholicos*) meaning “general” or “universal”—it carries the sense of world-wide church and in early Christian writings can bear the connotation of orthodox. The ***Roman Catholic church*** “emerges” after Constantine (fourth century) and much later. The word catholic and the Roman Catholic Church can be confusing, but they are very different.

The Creed also uses the word “hell” and can create some confusion. There are early versions with slightly different wording that we may have considered. In hind sight we probably should have used the version with the words “to the dead” which is a reference to Old Testament language for “sheol”/ “hades” (Hebrew and Greek respectively). Had we used that version there may not have been confusion, and for that we are sorry. “Descended to the dead” would have been a better rendering of Eph 4:9, the passage that likely gives us the language of the early Greek Apostolic Creed (κατελθόντα εἰς τὰ κατώτατα = descended to the lower earthly regions or earth below), a reference, as I said to what is known as *sheol / hades*.

And, just to be clear, the word “hell” in the Creed does not denote the place of eternal punishment, *Gehenna* of the New Testament, the lake of fire that burns forever. It is referring to *sheol / hades* of the Old Testament. This word is used often as a synonym for death, or the grave, and is associated with the depths of the earth, or the sea, but as we have alluded, the place of the dead, where there is some consciousness of the disembodied soul, and thus is not identical merely with “the grave”, the place where the physical dead body is laid. The term is often contrasted with heaven (for e.g. In Isaiah 14:15, the king of Babylon, who would exalt himself to heaven, to God's throne, instead is told “you are brought down to *sheol*, to the far reaches of the pit.” In the New Testament, Jesus threatens the same thing for the city of Capernaum.

If you would personally like to research further here are some recommended works.

A full and very helpful book would be:

Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles' Creed*. Zondervan, 2016.

Another, much shorter and quite uplifting and devotional one, would be this:

Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism*. Lexham Press, 2018