

Glossary of Terms

Apophatic Theology/spirituality: seeking to understand God by saying what God is not and/or through letting go of images of God.

Apostles Creed: Our earliest creed, based on questions a bishop would ask persons preparing for baptism. Our current form of this creed was probably finalized by the 6th century, based on the version used in the Roman church the previous few centuries. Unlike the Nicene Creed, it was never officially recognized by the Orthodox part of Christianity.

Apostolic: The term used to describe beliefs and practices traced back to the teachings of the first generation of Christians, many of whom were disciples of Jesus. It also can refer to a city or church founded or connected closely with one of the original disciples of Jesus, such as Ephesus and Rome. Tradition connects Ephesus with John and Rome is connected with Peter and Paul.

Asceticism: A way of Christian living that includes abstinence from almost anything that would give pleasure, and advocates strict discipline over how one lives, what one eats, where one lives, etc. The Desert Fathers were early examples of this type of Christian living.

Canon: The term used to describe the limited collection of authoritative writings that form our Old Testament and our New Testament.

Catechumenate: An extended time of training for adults in the basics of the Christian faith.

Christendom: The period from the 4th to the 20th centuries in Western civilization, during which the church was very powerful in both civil and religious matters.

Confessors: Christians who did not abandon their faith in the face of persecution, but weren't killed for their faith.

Denomination: A way of describing the divisions in the Christian world based on agreed upon doctrine, practice and polity. (Examples: Lutheran, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist...)

Docetism: An early version of Christianity, that emphasized the divinity of Christ to the point that they denied the humanity of Jesus. Since this deviated from the received apostolic tradition which formed the Rule of Faith, it was branded as heresy.

Gentile: A non-Jew.

Gnosticism: An early Christian heresy that promoted an understanding of what the ministry of Jesus was intended to accomplish for believers. They believed that Jesus passed on secret knowledge (Gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge) that would enable those who had access to this knowledge to reconnect with the distant but supreme God after death. A lesser god was in charge here on earth, and special knowledge was needed to pass through the barriers to the supreme God after death. The impact for the life of a gnostic believer was either asceticism or hedonism, since what happened in this life wasn't of importance for eternal life with God.

Greco-Roman: A term that describes the Mediterranean world during the period when Greece, followed by Rome, ruled. It often includes both language (Greek) and customs (Greek and Roman).

Hebrew Scriptures: What Protestant Christians often refer to as the Old Testament.

Heretic: A Christian whose beliefs were in opposition to the orthodox traditions about Jesus that had been handed down since the time of the apostles.

Incarnation: The Christian belief that Jesus was indeed God. God chose to be present in human form by being born of the Virgin Mary.

Lapsed: Christians who renounced their faith in the face of persecution.

Martyrs: Christians who were killed for their faith.

Monasticism: A disciplined, religious way of living, separate from the general public, and in community with others of the same sex.

Mythology: A collection of stories and myths that a particular group or religion hold in common. These stories contain truths about their shared beliefs that can't be scientifically proven. An example would be the various stories of the creation of the world found in the Bible.

Nicene Creed: The only ecumenical creed in the Christian community, since it is recognized as authoritative by all modern major divisions of the church. It was the result of the work of two councils, held in Nicea and Constantinople in the 4th century, in order to combat a movement in the church now known as Arianism.

Orthodox: A term used to describe the beliefs of part of the church that most closely aligned with the traditions and teachings handed down from the first followers of Jesus. Another way of saying this would be to note that orthodox beliefs aligned with the Rule of Faith. Beliefs not in alignment with the Rule of Faith were labeled heretical.

Patristic Period: This period of the Christian church begins immediately following the death of those who had known Jesus (100CE) and ends roughly with the 7th century (debated). It is often divided either between those who lived/taught/wrote prior to or following the Council of Nicea (325CE), or by the language they wrote in (Greek or Latin).

Rabbinic Judaism: Of all the various versions of Judaism we meet in the New Testament, the only ones that survived were the Christian Jews and the Pharisaic Jews. The latter becomes known as Rabbinic Judaism after the completion of the Babylonian Talmud in the 6th century. The system of worship and living forms the core of modern Jewish groups.

Rule of Faith: Also known as the Canon of Truth. It was the core set of beliefs handed down from the earliest times of the Christian movement, that most accurately reflected the oral teaching of the apostles and their first disciples. It became the measuring stick, or canon, that was used to determine if a teaching was orthodox (in agreement with this Rule of Faith or Canon of Truth) or heterodox (not in agreement with this Rule of Faith or Canon of Truth).

Torah: You know it as the first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. For the Jewish community it is the most sacred part of their Scriptures; everything else is in some sense commentary on Torah. For the first Christians, it was the core of their Scriptures, along with the Prophetic literature. Remember there was no New Testament at this time! Torah is much more than a set of laws. It includes the story of God's intervention in our world, and how the faithful are called to live as God's saved and covenant people.