Let's explore some of the basic beliefs/doctrines of Christianity by examining a classic text from the 4th century AD, namely, the so-called "Nicene Creed." The Creed is an ancient and fundamental statement of basic Christian beliefs. The official name of this document is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed because, although the first version of it was promulgated at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, an expanded version was adopted at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. This later ("Nicene-Constantinopolitan") version was formally promulgated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and is the so-called "Nicene Creed" used in many Christian communities today.

Here is the Creed in English:

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

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten [Son of God],  
obegotten of the Father before all ages,  
[God of God,] Light of Light, true God of true God;  
begotten, not made;  
[being] of one essence [substance, being] with the Father;

by [through] whom all things were made;  
who for us [men] and for our salvation came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
and became man;

and [He] was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried;  
and the third day he rose again,  
according to [in accordance with] the [prophesies in the Old Testament] Scriptures,  
and ascended into heaven,  
and sits at the right hand of the Father;

and He shall come again, with glory,  
to judge [both] the living and the dead;  
whose [and His] kingdom shall have no end.

And [I believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,  
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son, Filioque];  
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;  
who spoke by the Prophets.

[And I believe] in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church;  
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
[and] I look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.
Analysis/discussion

The first paragraph,

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

asserts (1) that Christianity is monotheistic, (2) that God the Father is "almighty," i.e., all-powerful (and also infinitely superlative in all other positive respects); (3) that God is the creator of the universe (heaven and earth) and of all things "visible and invisible," i.e., material and spiritual. Since God is the creator of the material world as well as the realm of "spirit," the material world is – in itself – good (contrary to some philosophies that have viewed matter as evil – e.g., Gnosticism, Manicheanism).

Just a couple of points in passing about the last part of the Creed (although I think it will be better if we go through the Creed from the beginning to the end without jumping around):

The word "Catholic" in the Creed does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. It refers to the "full" and "universal" Church of Christ. There was no "Roman Catholic Church" in the 4th and 5th centuries when the Creed was formulated. There were a "mainstream" Orthodox-Catholic Church and various sectarian and heretical movements....

Similarly, the Creed does not specify the details of baptism. It simply means that just one baptism is sufficient. No one needs to be baptized more than once. Baptists believe only in believer's baptism, so they don't approve of infant baptism. However, even baptists hold that once a believer has been (properly) baptized there is no need for any further baptisms for that individual. The disputes here center on the term "properly." ("Baptists" are not [really] ana-baptists.)

Here's the 2d paragraph of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (Credo = Latin for "I believe"):

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten [Son of God],
begotten of the Father before all ages,
[God of God,] Light of Light, true God of true God;
begotten, not made;
[being] of one essence [substance, being] with the Father;
[Key word = homoousion = same essence]

This paragraph proclaims the deity (divinity) of Jesus, who is identified as "Lord" (a name for God only) and as "Christ" [Christos] (i.e., the Messiah of Israel, God's "Anointed"). The paragraph goes on to assert that Christ was "begotten" but not created ("not made") by God the Father "before all ages" = usually interpreted to mean in eternity, not in time = so Christ, like the Father, is eternal. Then the paragraph states that Christ is fully divine (God from God, Light from Light, true God of true God) and is "of one essence" with [or has the same essence (homoousion) as] God the Father.

The Creed obviously teaches the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity: that in the one God, there are three distinct but equally divine persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (see the later paragraphs of the Creed).

In emphasizing the full essential deity (divinity) of Christ, the Creed is responding to an ancient heretical view known as Arianism (after Arius, 250-336 AD), according to which the 2d Person of the Trinity was not only "begotten of" but also created by God the Father. That view – that the 2d Person of the Trinity is a created being – was firmly rejected by the ancient church. None the less, there are some modern
Christians and churches still subscribing to versions of Arianism (e.g., Unitarians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons [?], modernists and liberals, etc.). Traditionalist/conservative Christians – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant – all adhere to the anti-Arian position expressed in the Creed.

The next parts of the Creed are as follows:

[I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ]....
by [through] whom all things were made;

The Father creates the world through the agency of the Son. People often miss this point in the Creed.

who for us men [humans] and for our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became man [human];

This is the doctrine of the Incarnation, and it is linked to the doctrine of the virginal conception (so-called "virgin birth") of Christ. God the Son, the 2d Person of the Holy Trinity, became a human being through a miraculous conception and birth. (Mary's pregnancy was caused by God the Holy Spirit, not by Mary's sexual intercourse with a man.) The man Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation (enfleshment, embodiment) of God the Son. In this act, God identifies Himself fully with the human race by becoming one of us, by taking human nature unto Himself. This God-Man identification is important. We will have to discuss it as we go along.

By the way, many people make a mistake on this teaching about the virginal conception and birth of Christ. This event is NOT the so-called "Immaculate Conception." “The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary” is a specific Roman Catholic teaching about the Mother of Jesus, according to which Mary was conceived by her parents without original sin and guilt. A "virgin birth" and an "immaculate conception" are two different things.

Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians (for different reasons) do not accept the RC doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. (Questions about this?)

Here are the next major parts of the Creed – this covers the crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming of Christ; the Last Judgment; and the final establishment of the Kingdom of God:

... and [He] was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to [in accordance with] the [prophesies in the Old Testament] Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father;

... and He shall come again, with glory, to judge [both] the living and the dead; whose [and His] kingdom shall have no end.

According to Christianity, Jesus died for the sins of the world. Now, remember that in my prior comment on the part of the Creed that states the doctrine of the Incarnation – the doctrine that says that Jesus is both divine and human – I stated that, in dying, Jesus identified fully with human nature. This is so because humanity is plagued with the condition of sin and death. So in dying, Jesus took his divine nature down into the grave; and when he was resurrected, when he rose from the dead, he brought human nature out of the clutches of death. Indeed, in ascending into heaven, he took human nature right up to the throne of God the Father. Christianity teaches that, through identifying with Jesus Christ in faith,
through accepting him as Savior and Lord, the individual can also be delivered from death and ascend into the presence of God in heaven.

and He shall come again, with glory,
to judge [both] the living and the dead;
whose [and his] kingdom shall have no end.

Here we have the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, which will result in the final establishment of the Kingdom of God. In the history of Christianity there are various – and conflicting – theories as to just when and how the final Kingdom will be established. [Perhaps we can discuss some of these...?]

There are various views of human nature presented in the history of Christian thought. One prominent view is this: A human being is a single being. In that single being, we can distinguish three dimensions: body, soul, and spirit. The body is the physical/biological aspect of the self; the soul is the psychological dimension of the self, encompassing mind, will, and emotions; and the spirit is the dimension through which a human being can commune with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

What happens when a human being dies? Generally speaking, the bodily aspect of the self dies, but the spirit and the soul (in union) move on, either into heaven or into hell (this primarily on the basis of faith in Christ or the absence thereof). After the Second Coming of Christ, all of the dead will be resurrected, and bodies will be reunited with spirits and souls. Each individual will be a "whole person" again – body, soul, and spirit. Then, all people will face God and be subjected to the "Last Judgment." In the Last Judgment the individual's destiny for heaven or for hell is given its final certification. The final separation of heaven and hell (what C.S. Lewis has called "the Great Divorce") will take place. Then the Kingdom of God will be finally established. There will be "a new heaven and a new earth." And so on....

Remember, this is a very complicated subject. What I have written here is only a GENERAL and more or less traditionalist account. There are various perspectives on this held by various Christians and Christian churches and denominations. Many modernistic and liberal Christians reject the picture above; some of them do not even believe in life after death. Conservative and/or traditionalist Christians would (at least generally) subscribe to the account I have given here. (For a modernist-liberal perspective, see http://www.beliefnet.com/story/21/story_2175_1.html)

Here are the last parts of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed:

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son, Filioque];
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the Prophets.

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. His equality with the Father and the Son is emphasized in His designation as "Lord" and in the line that states that all Three Persons are to be "worshipped and Glorified."

The Creed also says that the Holy Spirit gives life to and inspires the prophets who proclaim "in the name of the Lord."

The line that states that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father [and the Son]" is very important historically. It is the line in the Creed that was a cause of the split between the Eastern Church and the Western Church. [Perhaps I will comment on this later on.]

[And I believe] in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church;
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
[and] I look for the resurrection of the dead, 
and the life of the world to come.

The Church is one, holy, and "catholic." Earlier, I pointed out that the word "catholic" here does NOT refer to what we now know as the Roman Catholic Church. The word "catholic" (Greek, katholikos) means full, complete, universal.

Of course, the Church is meant to be one and holy. However, there are now many traditions/denominations (expressions?) of Christianity. What about the oneness? And how about holy? (I don't mean to say that the Church is not one or holy. But people do question these points and what they might mean.)

How about the term "Apostolic"? The leaders of the early church were the Apostles (sent ones), appointed by Jesus. The term "Apostolic" in the Creed asserts that the church (i.e., the "true" church) maintains the faith and teaching of the Apostles. All Christian churches claim to be "Apostolic" in this sense. Do they all, in fact, maintain the faith of the Apostles? Very controversial question!

I commented earlier on the "one baptism" issue. Here is another note on baptism:

Some Christians – "baptists" of one kind or another – recognize only BELIEVER'S baptism. Thus, when a person who was "baptized" as an infant joins the "baptist" group or church, they are usually baptized "again." However, it is not "again;" it is for the FIRST time because "baptists" do not recognize infant "baptism" as authentic. The new baptism is NOT a "re"-baptism.

Re: "born-again" Christians. They are not all "baptists." There are born-again Christians in almost every Christian church or denomination: Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists (yes), Pentecostals, etc., etc., etc. A born-again Christian who is Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox, or Presbyterian does not reject her/his baptism as an infant, nor does s/he seek another, different baptism. [But what about "the baptism in the Holy Spirit," so prominent among charismatics and pentecostalists?]

What is a born-again Christian? S/he is a person who judges her/his life up to conversion time to have been somehow outside of God's way and who then recognizes and receives Jesus Christ as her/his Savior and Lord. As a result of this conversion from one form of life to another, the "born-again" person enters into the Christian life with strong passion and enthusiasm, sees the Bible as the "Word of God," seeks to spread the "good news" (i.e., the gospel) of salvation through Christ as far and wide as s/he can, and so on.

"Born-again" Christianity is not a denomination or sect or specific church. It is the Christianity of those who have been converted to a certain view of what "being a Christian" is and what it means.

The last two lines of the Creed, quoted above,

[and] I look for the resurrection of the dead, 
and the life of the world to come.

affirm the resurrection of the dead as well as life in a world beyond the present one. I have also commented on that subject above.

Amen.

"Amen" means "so be it."
Let's also look at the Creed from the standpoint of liberal/modernistic Christianity.

Caveat: There are many species and varieties of Christian liberalism and modernism. Take a "Google" look around the Web for sites on "Liberal Christianity," "Christian Liberalism," "Theological Liberalism," "Theological Modernism," etc.

First point: Liberal-Modernists have a critical view of the Bible. They see it as an important – even inspiring – collection of texts. But they do not see it as "the Word of God." They see it as "human words about God." They employ modern techniques of biblical criticism, which leads them to reject many traditional understandings of the message of the Bible.

Second point: Liberal-Modernists are (usually) morally/ethically/politically liberal. Some might be more conservative on certain moral and political issues. However, in general: No strict moral rules. Homosexuality is OK. Same-sex marriage also OK. So is sex outside of marriage, as long as it is done "responsibly." Capital punishment is wrong. War is (almost) always wrong. Abortion is OK. So is euthanasia. So is assisted suicide in extreme medical situations. So is embryonic stem cell research. How about cloning? Etc., etc., etc.

Next, I will insert "liberal" and "modernist" comments into the "Nicene Creed," which we have discussed in a traditionalist or conservative way previously. Here we go:

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

God exists. However, it is not clear that the universe is a specific creation of God. It might have existed for all eternity along with God, and perhaps God has had some "shaping" influence on it. However, it seems that the best explanation of the universe and its development is the Theory of Evolution, which recognizes no evidence of "intelligent design" or divine presence in the cosmos.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten [Son of God],
begotten of the Father before all ages,
[God of God,] Light of Light, true God of true God;
begotten, not made;
[being] of one essence [substance, being] with the Father;

Jesus was a great teacher and a great man, perhaps even a "prophet" in some sense. However, he was just a man. He was not God. He was not a divine being. Indeed, he was not "the Christ" (the Messiah of Israel). He was not even "the Son of God" except possibly in the sense that all humans are "children of God." Jesus and his message are no more and no less authentic than Buddha and his message, or Muhammad and his message, etc.

by [through] whom all things were made;
who for us men [humans] and for our salvation came down from heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became man [human];

The universe was not created through Jesus Christ. He did not "come down from heaven," and he was not the incarnation of God the Son in human form. He was "just a man." He was conceived and born in the ordinary way – i.e., his mother had sexual intercourse with a man (Joseph?) and became pregnant, and nine months later, Jesus was born. The pregnancy was not caused by the "Holy Spirit." That is all a lot of ancient mythology. Jesus grew up to be a powerful teacher of moral (and political?) truths.
As for Christ "coming down" for our "salvation," there was no need for that. All human beings are ultimately "saved." God ultimately rejects no one. If there is a heavenly life after death, everyone acquires it, even "bad" people like Hitler.

and [He] was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried;
and the third day he rose again,
according to [in accordance with] the [prophesies in the Old Testament] Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;

Again, this is all mythology. Of course, he was crucified, and he was buried. But he did not "rise again." There was no resurrection. If there is any life after death – and there may or may not be – then Jesus's soul went on to be with God, which is what happens to all who die. There was no ascension into heaven, etc.

and He shall come again, with glory,
to judge [both] the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

There will be no Second Coming of Christ and no Last Judgment. If there is a kingdom of heaven, everybody will go there.

And [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 together is worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the Prophets.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a lot of theological gobble-dee-gook and double-talk (triple-talk?). There is only one God, and He is absolutely one. There are not "three persons" in God, only one.

[And I believe] in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church;

No. There are many expressions of Christianity. They are all OK (except perhaps the conservative and "fundamentalist" ones), but there is no such thing as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Each of us who wishes to be a Christian (and there is no necessity for that) must find the expression of "the faith" that makes sense to oneself. Also, there is nothing wrong with being non-Christian. Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, etc., etc. – even atheism – they are all OK.

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;

One? Why not more than one? Why not none? Different Christians have different views about baptism and other sacraments. Vive la difference! To each his own. Remission of sins? OK. But everybody's sins are ultimately remitted (forgiven) by God. Ultimately, God condemns (damns) no one.

[and] I look for the resurrection of the dead,

Perhaps there is life after death; perhaps not. Some believe it; some don't. There will be no "resurrection of the dead" in the traditional sense – i.e., no "resurrection of the body."

and the life of the world to come.

Maybe so, maybe no. Who really knows? Does it matter? What's wrong with just being dead? No consciousness; no experience; no pain; no distress.
Amen?

So be it? (The question mark is not a typo.)

One more point – not touching directly on the Nicene Creed:

From the traditional RC and Protestant perspectives, original sin and original guilt are like an inherited disease. We are living in a fallen, corrupt, sinful world. Of course, baptism removes original sin and guilt, but it does not remove the overall fallenness of the world. After baptism, the individual goes on living in a fallen world, where s/he will continually be tempted into and will commit her/his own sins, for which s/he will need God's forgiveness. Christ's death covers all sin and sins, but one must have faith in Christ and his work in order to receive forgiveness.

This topic is another one where Christian liberals and modernists depart from tradition. For the liberal/modernist, there is no such thing as original – inherited – sin or guilt. Each person is "free to choose" between right and wrong and is therefore responsible for her/his own sins and can receive God's forgiveness through repentance, moral struggle, and prayer.

This was too quick and too general. I am sure that I have not done full justice to the liberal/modernist point of view. Surf the net for better, more detailed statements.