

“Phil Cary’s commentary on the Nicene Creed exhibits two virtues—clarity and brevity, which entail a third—usefulness. Here is a truly inviting introduction to the faith once delivered to the saints in baptism and continuously declared throughout the world in the church’s confession.”

—SCOTT R. SWAIN,
president and James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“To sum up the Christian faith in just over 200 pages is no small task. To do so while unpacking the technical language of one of Christianity’s most ancient creeds is almost unfathomable. Yet Phillip Cary has managed to pull it off. His little handbook on the Nicene Creed manages to be erudite, insightful, and interesting—all at once. Phrase by phrase he unpacks the meaning of words that many find mind-numbing, using language that is both interesting and colloquial. Laced with Scripture, this book will tickle your imagination while expanding your vocabulary and strengthening your faith in the only begotten Son of the Father who came down from heaven to bring life to a dying world.”

—HAROLD L. SENKBEL,
author of *The Care of Souls*

“With characteristically lively prose, engaging style, and endearing wit, Phil Cary takes us on a stroll through the history of heated debates over the nature of Christian faith-claims that forged the creeds. He lays out for us the theological reasoning at the heart of the conciliar decisions and their ramifications for spiritual health. Meaty yet accessible, this volume will help worshipers who recite the creed to understand better what they confess. Likewise, it will challenge those who are skeptical of the function and origin of creeds, nudging them to reexamine their assumptions. Highly recommended for adults of all ages and stages, for parish study groups and personal learning alike.”

—KATHRYN GREENE-MCCREIGHT,
affiliate priest, Christ Church, New Haven;
spiritual director, Annand Program, Yale Divinity School

“Phillip Cary’s book is so much more than a phrase-by-phrase commentary on the Nicene Creed; it is my new favorite go-to book for systematic theology. It is careful and scholarly, yet in Cary’s style. . . . Several books have been written recently highlighting the importance of the creeds and confessions. And for good reason! The church across denominational lines is seriously adrift on a big sea looking for the right place to drop its anchor. Carl Truman famously wrote that ‘Scripture is the norming norm, creeds are the normed norm.’ He’s right, and what the Triune God has done for his creation is summarized in the Nicene Creed. Phillip Cary beautifully unwraps this treasure. This can be read as a daily devotional or by small groups, or it will be a library resource that pastors grab first in their preparations to preach and teach.”

—THE REV’D CANON CHUCK COLLINS,
director, Center for Reformation Anglicanism

“For over a thousand years the church across the globe confessed the Nicene Creed together. To be a Christian meant worshiping the Trinity of the Scriptures, a Trinity our church fathers described in the creed with orthodox clarity over against the threat of heresy. How strange—indeed, how sad—to admit that many Christians today have never read or confessed the Nicene Creed. Some have never even heard of the Nicene Creed. Phillip Cary’s book is a harvest in a time of famine. With a precision that does not forfeit accessibility, Cary not only explains each word in the Nicene Creed, but he summons the church today to link arms with brothers and sisters of yesterday to confess a Trinity apart from which we have no Christianity. My earnest prayer is that every Christian reads this book!”

—MATTHEW BARRETT,
author of *Simply Trinity*; associate professor of
Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

THE NICENE
CREED

An Introduction

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CREED

An Introduction

Phillip Cary



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PRAYER

WHEN THE SPIRIT of truth comes,
he will guide you into all truth.

He will glorify me,
for he will take what is mine
and declare it to you.

All that the Father has is mine.

John 16:13–15

GLORY TO GOD in the highest,
and peace to his people on earth.

LORD GOD, heavenly King,
almighty God and Father,
we worship you,
we give you thanks,
we praise you for your glory.

LORD JESUS CHRIST, only Son of the Father,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world:
have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father:
receive our prayer.

FOR YOU ALONE are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

FATHER IN HEAVEN, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan did proclaim him your beloved Son and anoint him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his name may walk in newness of life and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

The Historical Setting

THE NICENE CREED originated because ancient Christians were appalled. A teacher in one of the most influential churches in the world was trying to get them to speak of Christ and say things like “there was once when he was not” and “he came to be out of nothing.” They had good reason to be appalled. Christians worship Jesus Christ as Lord, exalted at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. To say “there was once when he was not” would be to say that he is not eternal like God the Father—that he came into being from non-existence just like

all God's creatures. That would mean he is not really God at all, but one of the things God made. To say this would be to say that what Christians have been doing all along, worshipping Jesus as Lord, is the kind of thing pagans do: worshipping something that is not fully, truly, ultimately God. The Nicene Creed was written to say *no*, in the strongest possible terms, to that kind of Christian paganism.

It said *no* by saying *yes* to who God really is, and who Jesus is. It states the essentials of Christian faith in God the Father and his eternal Son, Jesus our Lord, and it adds some essentials about the Holy Spirit as well. And sometimes it says who God is by saying what he has done to make us who *we* are: God's creatures whom he raises from death to everlasting life in Christ. So the Creed is a fundamental statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is God in the flesh coming down from heaven for us and our salvation, so that we may share in his kingdom that has no end.

The *no* is important because of the *yes*. To say *no* is to draw a boundary and say: We're not going there, because that's not who Christ is. False teaching about who Christ is leads us away from faith in the real Christ and gives us a bogus substitute. It

means preaching a different gospel from the one that comes to us from our Lord's apostles, which is why the apostle Paul goes so far as to say: Let anyone who teaches differently be *anathema*, accursed (Galatians 1:9). Heeding the apostle, the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 composed a creed that is the precursor to the one this book studies, and added anathemas—solemn curses against anyone who teaches things like “there was once when he was not” or “he came to be out of nothing.” It did not name Arius, the man who taught this, because its purpose, like Paul's, was not to condemn a particular man but to exclude what he taught. Arius was always free to change his mind, to repent, to submit to the judgment of the Council and teach the same truth. But real heretics are stubborn (you can't be a heretic just by being mistaken; you have to persist in teaching your mistake to the church even after being corrected), and eventually the doctrine that took shape in opposition to the Council of Nicaea came to be known as Arianism, one of the most famous heresies in the history of the church.

But this book is not about a heresy but about the truth: the gospel of Jesus Christ taught by the Creed that grew out of the faith of Nicaea. It's a book for Christians who want to

understand their own faith better, and thus to grow in the knowledge of God, by learning what the ancient teachers of the Nicene faith had to give us.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEEA, after which the Nicene Creed is named, was a gathering of bishops in AD 325. They met in the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor, which is now the town of Iznik in Turkey. It is a little more than fifty miles as the crow flies from Istanbul, the city that used to be called Constantinople back when it was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Rome itself was defeated a century or so after the Council of Nicaea and the Western Roman Empire gradually disintegrated, but the Eastern Empire remained for another thousand years and became what is known as the Byzantine Empire—after Byzantium, the earlier name for Constantinople. “Constantinople” means “the city of Constantine,” the Roman emperor who made it his capital in 330 and who had also called the bishops to come to the Council at Nicaea in 325.

Nicaea came to be recognized as the first ecumenical council, from the Greek noun *oikoumene*, or *ecumene* in Latin, meaning “the whole inhabited world.” An ecumenical council is a council for the church throughout the world, the church of

the *ecumene*. This was a new idea, but meeting in councils was not. Christian bishops, the leaders of local churches, had been meeting for years in regional councils or synods (from *synodos*, which is just the Greek word for “council”). This was an important way of keeping order in the churches and of keeping the faith. A bishop had the job of preserving the faith as it was handed down in the church of his town since the time of its founding. The name for this handing down in Latin is *traditio*, from which we get the word “tradition.” It was a handing down that began in some places, such as Jerusalem and Rome and Antioch, in the earliest days of the Christianity, before the New Testament was written. If there was a serious discrepancy in teaching or church practice between one town and another, the bishops could meet in a synod to straighten things out. The Council of Jerusalem, for example, met to straighten out disputes about how the churches growing out of the missionary work of the church of Antioch were handling things (Acts 15:1–35). In that case, the burning question was how to incorporate believers in Christ who were not Jewish into the fellowship of the church. In this case, at Nicaea, the question was how to exclude the teaching of Arius from churches throughout the world.

The most important way the bishops did that was to produce a confession of the Christian faith—which is what a creed is. Prior to this time, creeds were handed down orally rather than written, as people coming to Christ were taught some form of confession to affirm when they were baptized. It was a way of saying what they were committing themselves to as they joined the Body of Christ. The confession of faith that we now know as the Apostles' Creed, for example, took shape originally in Rome as an oral baptismal confession.¹ Each town had its own traditional confession, handed down through generations of bishops, with many small variations. But they all followed a threefold pattern, so that everyone in the *ecumene* was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as our Lord commanded (Matthew 28:19). What evidently happened at Nicaea is that one of these unwritten local confessions was adapted, with some additions directed specifically against Arius' teaching, to provide a single creed for the whole *ecumene*.

THE CREED PRESENTED in this book is the most widely-used confession of faith in the Christian world. It is not the original

Creed of Nicaea in 325 but an expanded confession formulated at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and officially accepted as a statement of the Nicene faith at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.² In the interests of historical accuracy, scholars often give it a long name, like the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” but I will use the more familiar name “Nicene Creed,” which accords with the reason it was accepted by the church throughout the world: it is a fuller way of confessing the same faith as the Council of Nicaea. Thus for the purposes of this book, as well as in the ordinary usage of the church, the label “Nicene Creed” designates a different text from “the Creed of Nicaea.” Along with a number of small differences, the Nicene Creed omits some things in the Creed of Nicaea, including the anathemas, and adds a good deal to what is said about the Holy Spirit. The result is an expanded confession of the faith of Nicaea, and as such it has come to be accepted as *the* ecumenical Creed, the confession of the Nicene faith of the whole *ecumene*, and is incorporated into the regular worship of the vast majority of Christians around the globe, including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and most Protestants who use a regular liturgy.

It is worth saying a bit more about the unity and diversity within what we can now call the *ecumenical* church, the church of the *ecumene* that agrees in confessing the Nicene faith. It is the church that deserves to be called orthodox (small “o”) because it teaches the right faith and worship (*orthodoxia* in Greek). It is also catholic (small “c”), meaning “universal” (*katholikos* in Greek). And it is evangelical (small “e”) because it is the church of the gospel (*euangelion* in Greek). In the lower-case sense of these words, the one holy church of God, which the Creed teaches us to honor as the Body of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, is orthodox, catholic, evangelical, and ecumenical, and its faith is the faith of Nicaea.

The diversity within the one ecumenical church, which ought not to divide it, can be distinguished by names with capital letters. We will need to mark the distinction between orthodox (small “o”), which embraces the whole Nicene *ecumene*, and the Orthodox (capital “O”), including Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and many others, all grouped under the heading “Eastern Orthodox,” whose heritage can be traced back to the Eastern Roman Empire, where the dominant language was Greek. And we must likewise mark the distinction between catholic (small “c”), a term

we will meet in the Creed itself to designate the whole church, and Roman Catholics (capital “C”) who are Christians in full communion with the Pope, who is the bishop of Rome. Their heritage goes back to the Western Roman Empire, where the dominant language was Latin. Very early on, there was a standard Latin translation of the Nicene Creed that ended up—as we shall see—with a few differences from the Greek version, one of which is trivial, another interesting, and the third tragic. Protestants are heirs of this Western tradition, and most translations of the Nicene Creed used in the Protestant churches have their roots in the ancient Latin translation. The Latin Creed is still with us, familiar to lovers of church music by composers such as Palestrina, Bach, and Mozart.

THE TRANSLATION OF the Creed I have made for purposes of this book does not have exactly the same wording as any version used in the churches, for unfortunately there is no one standard translation of the Nicene Creed in English. I assume that readers will continue to say the Creed in the version they’re accustomed to using on Sundays—I certainly hope so, for the opportunity to confess the faith together in worship is one of the great blessings of the Creed, and not something

to tamper with. But because there are so many versions, some of which go back hundreds of years and use English that is no longer familiar, I will often need to comment on alternative translations and old wording that might be confusing. In my own translation I have tried to stay as close as possible to the original Greek.³ But I have also commented on the standard Latin translation when it diverges from the Greek, for this often explains variations in the English versions, giving us words like “consubstantial” and phrases like “was made man.”

To organize the phrase-by-phrase commentary, I have divided the Creed into its three “articles,” which is a technical term (from which we get the phrase “an article of faith”) for the parts of the Creed devoted to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In addition, it is convenient to divide the second article into two parts, the first centered on the divinity of the Lord Jesus and the second on his humanity.

As you may have noticed already, a great deal of this book focuses on words and their history. For the Creed consists of words that are much older than any of us who now say them. A richer and more accurate understanding of these words is therefore a way of arriving at a deeper understanding of our own faith, which we share with those who have confessed the

Creed over the centuries of the Christian tradition. For with them we too have been given one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

Because the words are old, they have layers. One aim of this book is to give you access to these layers, so that when you say a word like “incarnate,” you will hear beneath it the Latin word *carnem* and will think “flesh.” And then you can tune your ears to the way the word “flesh” echoes down the hallways and passages of Scripture and into the Creed, as well as into the language we use in church services. I will assume readers of this book are familiar with the Bible but not necessarily with the traditions of Christian theology, so I will spend a good deal of time on words like “incarnation,” which for theologians are very commonplace, but which for many churchgoers, I have found, are unnecessarily mysterious and easily misunderstood, because the words have never been explained to them. Getting our ears more fully tuned to hear these words gets us more deeply immersed in the richness of Christian worship.

It is another aim of this book to open doors to further study, and for that purpose I will often introduce theological terms that are not found in the Creed itself, but that have been used in the Christian tradition to expound the Nicene faith. I will

frequently be dwelling on technical terms that theologians use without explanation—terms that I think are genuinely helpful not just for those studying the technicalities of theology but for ordinary Christians who want to understand their own faith. I will be very happy if this book serves some readers as a gateway to theological studies.

The book will also devote a great deal of attention to the apostolic roots of the Nicene faith as found in Scripture. The aim in this is to show biblical Christians how the Creed gives words to what they already believe, so that they can hear these words as gospel, the story of our God. In Martin Luther's terms, the Nicene Creed gives us gospel rather than law, because it is not telling us what to do but telling us what God has done for us and our salvation—all the things we cannot do to save ourselves, transform our lives, and make ourselves good Christians, for they are things that only God can do. The good news is that in Christ, God has done these things, and by his life-giving Spirit he has made them ours. The Nicene Creed is a blessing and a joy, for it is a confession of faith in this good news.

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every entry, no matter how small, should be recorded to ensure the integrity of the financial data. This includes not only sales and purchases but also expenses, income, and any other financial activities.

The second part of the document provides a detailed breakdown of the accounting process. It outlines the steps from recording transactions to the preparation of financial statements. This includes identifying the accounts affected by each transaction, debiting and crediting the appropriate accounts, and ensuring that the accounting equation remains balanced.

The third part of the document focuses on the analysis and interpretation of the financial statements. It explains how to use the income statement, balance sheet, and statement of cash flows to assess the company's financial performance and position. It also discusses the importance of comparing the company's results to industry benchmarks and historical data.

The final part of the document provides a summary of the key points discussed and offers some practical advice for implementing sound accounting practices. It stresses the importance of consistency, accuracy, and transparency in all financial reporting.

THE NICENE CREED

(In a close literal translation, with alternative versions in brackets)

We believe [I believe]
in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible;
and in one Lord,
Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God,
who was begotten of the Father before all ages,
[God from God,]
Light from Light,
True God from True God,
begotten, not made,
having the same being as the Father,
through whom all things came to be;
who for us human beings and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate
from the Holy Spirit
and the Virgin Mary

and became human,
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate,
and suffered
and was buried,
and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father,
and shall come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
of whose kingdom there shall be no end;

and in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord and Giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father
[and from the Son],
who with the Father and Son together is worshiped and co-glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets;
in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.
We confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;
we look for the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the age to come.

Amen.

WE BELIEVE [I BELIEVE]

THE INTERESTING DIFFERENCE between the Greek and the Latin versions of the Creed, which was mentioned in the Introduction, is found right here in the first word: the Greek-speakers in the Eastern Roman Empire said “we” and the Latin-speakers in the West said “I.”⁴ This is in fact how we got the term “creed,” from the Latin word, *credo*—a one-word way of saying, “I believe.” Turn it into a noun, “the *Credo*,” and you have a standard term for the Creed. The standard Greek term, on the other hand, was simply “the faith,” *he pistis*. So in this sense the Nicene Creed *is* the Nicene faith. To repeat the Creed aloud is to confess the faith, in a double sense of the

term: it is to give utterance to the Christian faith in the words of “the faith,” which is the Creed.

Another ancient term for the Creed, surprisingly enough, is “symbol” (from the Latin *symbolum*, derived from the Greek *symbolon*). It is a word with many meanings. To this day, the English word “symbol” can be used to designate a creed, and if you see a book in the theology section of the library on “Symbolics,” it is probably an old study of creeds and confessions.

Exactly why *symbolum* was used to designate a creed or confession of faith needs an explanation, which will also help us see why the West said “I believe.” In ordinary Latin, *symbolum* could be used to mean a sign or token, such as a password or the sign and countersign used by soldiers to recognize each other. Instead of saying “Halt! Who goes there?” a sentry in the dark of night might give the first half of a password as a sign, and his fellow soldier completes the password with a countersign (“O Susanna!” / “Oh, don’t you cry for me!”), thus identifying himself as one who belongs to the same army. Another meaning of *symbolum* was an oath or pledge of allegiance used when a soldier was inducted into the army. The

practice of baptism worked like this in the early church. To be baptized was like joining Christ's army—an unusual army in which you did not kill but might well be killed, bearing witness as a martyr—and your baptismal confession was the pledge by which you were identified, as if by a kind of password, when you signed up.⁵

The actual baptismal ceremony looked a bit like giving a sign and countersign. It involved three questions, which could be as short as “Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?” and “Do you believe in Jesus Christ and his cross?” and “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?”⁶ Usually the questions were longer, and could be quite similar to the Nicene Creed; for example: “Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died, and rose again on the third day alive from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?”⁷ In any case, the response to each question was the same: “I believe,” after which the person was immersed in water. This threefold immersion was Christian baptism, and the question-and-answer was the *symbolum*, the

baptismal sign and counter-sign of the Christian faith. Turn the question-and-answer into a confession that we can all say together, and you get a creed.

The Creed is the faith we *confess*, which means simply that we say it aloud. The act of uttering something aloud makes a difference, as when we confess our sins rather than hide them. To confess *the faith* is to make what we believe into something shared, public, and recognizable, not just a fleeting thought in the heart. The baptismal confession makes us members of Christ's army, and to this day there are places where this confession can get you killed. So confession is more than expression. It is not just saying what is in our heart; it is joining a community and sharing its dangers and tasks as well as its blessings. When we say "I believe" in our baptism or "we believe" in a Sunday liturgy, we are making a commitment that is a pledge of allegiance, joining us to other believers around the world in the Body of Christ, some of whom are bound to get into trouble for keeping this commitment.

Hence even when Christians in the West begin the Creed with the words, "I believe," this is not just an individual expression of faith but a commitment to the faith of a community, the Body of Christ which the individual has joined in baptism.

Some Western churches have in fact now switched back to the Greek version, saying “We believe.” Yet in an important sense, “I believe” is actually the older form of confession, being used in baptisms long before Nicaea. “We believe” was a new way of confessing the faith, reflecting a new setting. Instead of a baptismal confession, it was a conciliar confession. The Nicene Creed begins with “we believe” because it originated as the confession of a council, a gathering of bishops presenting what they believed and taught as the faith of the whole ecumenical church, to be confessed together. This is also why it was eventually incorporated into the eucharistic liturgies of the churches, both East and West.

ARTICLE 1

**GOD THE
FATHER**

IN ONE GOD, THE FATHER, THE ALMIGHTY

THE CREED BEGINS by using familiar language, common in ancient philosophy as well as pagan mythology, but it soon proceeds to do something unprecedented with this language. “Father Almighty” was a term well-known among pagans. It appears frequently, for example, in the Roman epic poem the *Aeneid*, to designate Jupiter, the king of the mythological gods on Mount Olympus. It turns out that Jupiter is hardly what Christians would call almighty, as he is easily frustrated by the scheming of other gods and the problems of mortals. Certainly, creating heaven and earth is well beyond his power—not to

mention ruling it in justice and wisdom, which is an especially prominent aspect of the Greek term here, *Pantokrator*, which literally means “Ruler over all things.” The Creed is talking not just about power but about how God our Father governs all things—which, as we shall see, means that his Son, a crucified man, is king forever.

We should also bear in mind that belief in one God was by no means unique to Christians and Jews. Sophisticated pagans, such as the philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, had much to say about a unique First Principle that was eternal and divine, but which was not a personal being like Jupiter. Aristotle actually called this principle “God,” while Plato called it “the Good,” and Plotinus made it the source of all things. Christians who studied philosophy found a good deal to like in this kind of philosophy, and it became common in Christian theology to speak of God as the First Principle, the supreme Good which is the source of all things. But in confessing the Creed, ancient Christians were using this shared language, “one God,” to say something more specific and biblical, which only starts to be clear when we come to see why, in the second article of the Creed, we will hear of Jesus as the “one Lord.”

MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

THIS PHRASE LANDS us, of course, right at the beginning of the Bible, when God created heaven and earth (Genesis 1:1). Scripture uses the phrase “heaven and earth” to designate the whole creation from top to bottom. Together, heaven above and earth beneath are all the things that exist, other than the God who made them all.

In Genesis 1, however, the word “heaven” is used in a rather limited sense. It refers to the visible heavens we can see above us, populated by the stars, the moon, and the sun—just as the sea is populated by fish, the air by birds, and the earth by creeping things and cattle. Elsewhere the Bible speaks of a

highest heaven that is above the heavens we see, calling it “the heaven of heavens.”⁸ This is where God is enthroned above the visible heavens, because “his majesty is above earth and heaven” (Psalm 148:13). It is a place beyond the places of the visible universe—not a place we can travel to (no spaceship could ever take us there) for it is where our Lord Jesus Christ is enthroned at the right hand of God the Father, surrounded by the unending praise and gladness of the angels and arch-angels and all the host of heaven. Because this is high above the visible heavens, a different dimension from any place we could ever see, the Creed must go beyond all visible things in order to speak of the fullness of what God has created.

OF ALL THINGS VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

THE NEWER TRANSLATION that many churches use, “seen and unseen,” is not quite as precise as “visible and invisible,” because what the Creed speaks of here is two realms of the creation, and the invisible realm is not just something we haven’t seen but something we cannot ever see with our physical eyes. It is the realm of angels, both the blessed angels in heaven and the demons, who are fallen angels cast out of heaven (Revelation 12:7–9).

This phrase lands us in the letter to the Colossians, which teaches us that the creation of all things is the work of Christ,