

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

A Study of the Nicene Creed

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The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried. On the third day He rose again 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.

We 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 worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Translation: The English Language Liturgical Consultation

Contents

1. “No Creed but Christ”?	1
2. A Corporate Confession	9
3. Faith and Godliness	15
4. Access to the Father	21
5. Almighty Creator	29
6. God of God	37
7. For Us and for Our Salvation	45
8. Crucified for Us	51
9. The Resurrection	59
10. The Ascension	65
11. Ascended and Coming Again	77
12. The Holy Spirit	85
13. Filioque	91
14. Who Has Spoken by the Prophets	97
15. One Church	105
16. One Baptism	115
17. The Life of the World to Come	121
18. Key Players and the Historical Context	127
Further Reading	145

1

“No Creed but Christ”?

If one word could sum up the current theological situation, it would be amnesia. The real problem with amnesia, of course, is that not only does the patient forget his loved ones and friends, but he no longer remembers who he is. Too many within church leadership today seem to have forgotten that the building of a foundational Christian identity is based upon that which the church has received, preserved, and carefully transmitted to each generation of believers.¹

What do you believe? A confident young man, attempting to sound neutral and levelheaded, might remark, “No creed but Christ: that’s my confession of faith.” He continues, “I don’t like all these divisive doctrinal questions. They just create a negative and intolerant religious environment.”

How quickly and easily this comment rolls off the lips of so many people! You would think that rattling off this mantra relieves a person of all the entanglements of doctrinal controversy. After all, doesn’t everyone know that “doctrine divides”? This seems to be the conventional wisdom of the day. People today are desperate to escape the snares of dogma, denominations, and other negative religiously entangling controversies. They believe that the barnacles of doctrinal controversy have scarred the church so badly that we should avoid dogma and doctrine like some kind of a medieval plague.

1. D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9.

This provokes a very important question: would avoiding creeds and confessions really liberate us from our problems or clear away the confusion? When you begin to tackle this question, an irony emerges. When someone is asked the most basic questions about Jesus Christ, they immediately begin to articulate a credal statement. What do you believe about Jesus? Was He really God? Was He fully God or was He only partly divine? I thought He was the Son of God and not God from all eternity. How does this make any sense? How could He be both God and man? How could He exist in one person with two distinct natures? On one level these questions are quite simple. Yet, on another level these are the questions that drive us to the very foundations of our faith. What do you believe about Jesus? A creed of course helps to provide answers to these simple questions.

A creed, in fact, is the result of answering these questions. Yes, any attempt to answer these questions results in a creed even if it is only a poorly worded or false one. Creeds, therefore, are unavoidable. This is too central to miss; creeds are unavoidable. The word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe.” Any attempt to confess what one believes is a creed. Saying “no creed but Christ” is just as much a creed as a written statement is a creed. You should see the self-contradictory problem with saying “no creed but Christ.” Even though it is short and rather ill-conceived it is nonetheless a confession or creed. Hence, rather than liberating themselves from the snares of creeds, those who say this have actually entangled themselves in a poorly conceived one.

The Scriptures say in James 2:19, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” It is never enough to say that you “believe.” The real question remains: *what* do you believe about Jesus? Reality has a way of foisting this upon us. When you consider that Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, and a whole host of other religions all acknowledge a belief in Jesus, it should be obvious that affirming a belief in Jesus is simply not enough.

In order to be organized and meaningful, even a local community club develops some kind of guidelines to distinguish who is a member and who is not. At this point, confessions of faith become not only necessary but also vital to the well-being of the church. Creeds protect us from error and guide us in truth. Knowing a creed can help to distinguish a Muslim from a Christian. Most reasonable people would affirm that this is helpful. Furthermore, if you assume Christianity to be true, it is not an exaggeration to say that knowing a creed may make the difference between heaven and hell.

The foregoing examples should make it clear that creeds have always been a necessary and obvious part of being a follower of Christ. As one great historian of the creeds, Philip Schaff, says,

In a certain sense it may be said that the Christian Church has never been without a creed (*Ecclesia sine symbolis nulla*). The baptismal formula and the words of institution of the Lord's Supper are creeds; these and the confession of Peter antedate even the birth of the Christian Church on the day of Pentecost. The Creed is indeed not founded on symbols, but on Christ; not on any words of man, but on the word of God; yet it is founded on Christ as confessed by men.²

As Schaff notes, the concept of confessing God by means of a creed was not the invention of the Christian Church. Indeed, some have even argued that God Himself required the ancient Jews to confess him by means of a creed called the *shema*. The *shema* is a kind of primal creed found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God the Lord is one." God required this creed and Jesus Himself used it to answer various people when He was confronted with basic questions.³

Creeds are not only necessary; they are also helpful. Creeds help us answer very old and very difficult questions. Too many

2. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. I: The History of Creeds (Baker Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 [1931]), 5.

3. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 374.

people today try to answer these questions as if they were the first person to face the issue. The sad truth is that they are like the frustrated little boy who wonders how he can make one of his toys move faster. He begins to wonder if he could stop dragging his toy along the ground and make it move more smoothly. He asks himself, "What would help my toys move faster and what would it look like? What shape would it take? How could things move faster than being dragged on the ground?" The agonizing problem seems laughable to those of us who desperately want the little fellow to take a look at the wheels on his father's car. Wouldn't that help? Creeds help us like this. They keep us from trying to reinvent the wheel.

The ancient creeds of the church are God's gift to us; they are not doctrinal entanglements. Ironically, they are not the cause of doctrinal controversy; they are the answer to it. We should be happy to know that the ancient creeds of the church can liberate us from the frustrations of doctrinal controversy. They ease the burden of reinventing the wheel and lift us onto the shoulders of men who have gone before us. This is a great benefit. This gives us a very good advantage. For instance, instead of trying to create a wheel, we can move on to other things. We can, for example, work on fine-tuning the engine or make the interior more comfortable.

Creeds are like lights in a dark world. There is always a lot of theological work to be done, but it is easier to do the work in the light rather than in the dark. We don't need to turn off the lights and grope around in the darkness. Creeds can act like lights in dark times. In the middle of a difficult controversy, creeds can help to clear away the confusion and provide us with guidance. In certain settings, groping in the dark can be quite dangerous. Thus, to ignore the light and guidance of creeds would be folly and arrogance.

I have heard some people say that they don't want to depend on other people for truth. They would prefer to work it out on their own. "All I need," they say, "is Jesus and my Bible." They act as if depending on the work of others diminishes indepen-

dence of thought. This, however, is not the Christian approach to life. Indeed, it is nothing more than arrogance cloaked in false piety.

Looking to the past reveals both wisdom and humility. We should humbly look to the past for help and we should not be embarrassed to do so. It is as obvious as asking your parents a question about something that you know they have already confronted and overcome. Wouldn't a wise son ask his father for help? Men who have lived before us are just as much our parents in the faith as those who live today. This is partly why the men of the ancient church are called the “fathers.” The Bible tells us to honor our fathers. It is a sign of due and proper humility to ask people who already know the answers rather than to tackle the problem all on our own.

It is not a sign of humility to rely solely on yourself. To the contrary, it reeks of arrogance. Charles Spurgeon says the following:

You are not such wisacres as to think or say that you can expound the Scripture without the assistance from the works of divine and learned men who have labored before you in the field of exposition. . . . It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.⁴

Creeds not only provide us with help, guidance, and humility—they are also an excellent witness to a needy world. In the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Christ commands Christians to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all that He commanded them. Creeds help us teach others the faith. Indeed, Christ also tells His followers in Matthew 10:32 to “confess” him before men. Paul says the same thing in Romans 10:9: “If you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.”

4. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, Lecture 1.

This means that creeds can be a useful part of our liturgy. As we confess our God, we also experience the blessing of doing so with others who share this faith with us. Thus too we corporately confess our faith to the watching world. Creeds assist us to worship in a way that is decent and orderly. What a blessing to our children who grow up hearing this truth over and over again—they are more likely to remember and believe it. Philip Schaff reminds us,

There is an express duty, when we are received into the membership of the Christian Church, and on every proper occasion, to profess the faith within us, to make ourselves known as followers of Christ, and to lead others to him by the influence of our testimony.⁵

This express duty is running into conflict with popular notions about growing the church. There seems to be nothing less than an obsession to diminish doctrine so that the church can grow. After all, people may not agree with doctrine, and what really matters is that they just believe in Jesus. I hope you can see how this raises the obvious question, “*What* do you believe about Jesus?”

Are you really being sensitive to those who are “seeking” answers if you avoid “teaching them whatever Jesus has commanded you” as He says in the Great Commission? Is growing the church really the only thing that Jesus requires in the Great Commission? You may be able to grow a large congregation, but are you being faithful to the Great Commission, which requires “teaching” people what they must confess—or in other words, teaching them creeds? Jesus pushed Peter to this very point when He insisted that Peter answer the question, “Yes, but who do you say that I am?” Sooner or later, in this world or in the next, we will be responsible for how we answer this question.

While the whole world seems to be going insane over the notion of tolerance, Christians need to strive to make sense of

5. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 4.

the master's demands. We should not be afraid of taking the time to cultivate substance and excellence in how we confess our Lord. Creeds can even help us do this. Though directed to a somewhat different point, Alexis de Tocqueville's words are appropriate when he says,

All who aspire to literary excellence in democratic nations ought frequently to refresh themselves at the springs of ancient literature; there is no more wholesome medicine for the mind. . . . I think that they have some special merits, admirably calculated to counterbalance our peculiar defects.⁶

Of course if we are either ignorant or arrogant, we won't admit that we have any "peculiar defects." Still, if this sage advice is true of the uninspired literature of antiquity, how much more aptly does it direct us to the creeds of our faith? Those of us who long for Christian excellence in a creedless and chaotic age must drink deeply from the refreshing springs of our ancient confessions. There is no more wholesome medicine to the soul. To ignore them would not only be arrogant, it would be tragic and deadly.

Creeds protect us from danger. If you were walking along a forest path, wouldn't you appreciate it if someone warned you of a dangerous animal further down the trail? If you were about to drive a car with no brakes, wouldn't you appreciate it if someone warned you? Creeds offer us this kind of a warning so we can avoid potential dangers. This is precisely why the Nicene Creed was written. It was forged in the heat of dangerous controversy.

The Council of Nicea was convened because of prevailing questions about the nature of the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father. These were no small questions. According to T. F. Torrance,

The basic decision taken at Nicaea [sic] made it clear that the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 62.

Godhead was regarded in the Church as the supreme truth upon which everything else in the Gospel depends. . . . Thus the very essence of the Gospel and the whole of the Christian faith depend on the centrality and primacy of the relation in being and agency between Jesus Christ and God the Father.⁷

When someone says they have “no creed but Christ,” they may think it sounds tolerant and wise, but it is neither. It is not only unwise, but it is the height of arrogance and foolishness. Worse yet, it is not only personally foolish, it is dangerous to the whole Christian community. The question is never *if* you have a confession; the question is always *what* your confession is. This is where the Nicene Creed offers us light in the darkness and guidance in dangerous times.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why do some people avoid creeds?
2. Why are creeds unavoidable?
3. What does the word *credo* mean?
4. Why isn't it enough to believe in one God?
5. Were creeds the invention of the church?
6. What Bible references speak of confessing the faith?
7. List several ways that creeds can help us.
8. How does using creeds express humility?
9. What was the main issue of the Council of Nicea?
10. Find some Bible passages not cited in the chapter that are relevant to these issues.

7. T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 3, 5.

2

A Corporate Confession

We believe . . .

In Greek, the first word of the Nicene Creed is the verb *pistuomen*, which means “we believe.” While the Apostle’s Creed begins with the words, “I believe,” the Nicene Creed begins with the first person plural pronoun: “*We* believe.” This strikes some people as a distinctive and an improper use of the first person plural. Why did the fathers begin with the pronoun *we*? After all, isn’t it more personal to speak of what *I* believe as an individual Christian rather than what *we* believe as Christians?

Though some in the Middle Ages proposed that the apostles themselves created the Apostle’s Creed, it was not a creed formulated officially in the courts or councils of the church. This may partially account for the first person singular pronoun of the apostle’s creed. However, there is a wealth of wisdom in the powerful little word *we*.

As the church’s first “official” ecumenical creed, the Nicene Creed was not the expression of an individual, but of the corporate body of Christ; the church. In this sense, both historically and doctrinally the creed reflects something pointedly Christian regarding the corporate character of the faith. There is an important unifying and communal character to the first word of the Nicene Creed.

The creed expresses the Christian belief that the faith we possess is “our” faith, not primarily “my” faith. The faith that we believe as Christians is the faith given to us from our Father