

Faithful to the Revealed Word

A Refresher on the Nicene Creed

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Part 1 - The Need for Creeds - Introduction

In the beginning Adam had no fear of persecution. Instead he was surrounded by absolute goodness. God evaluated all of creation as **טוֹב מְאֹד**. The enemies of God could not touch Adam. That's because he held the one thing which could keep them at bay: The Word of God. The only route of attack available to Satan was to get the man and his wife to loosen their grip on the revealed Word. He therefore unleashed his assault with a challenge on their knowledge. "Did God really say?" The woman responded by pointing to God's gracious, abundant provision for them in the fruits of the garden. She then echoed the Lord God's clear command. "God did say..." She was the first to confess her faith in the face of opposition with her short, clear testimony about the revealed Word.

Eve knew this much: "God is good and gracious. His revealed word should be taken with serious reverence." So she confessed it and, in a sense, formulated the first authoritative affirmation of religious faith, or creed. The word creed comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning "I believe." And she wasn't alone. One could also argue that Adam, who was with her, joined in her confession by his silent consensus. And so the Church, at the very beginning of time, made its first confession right in the face of its first and most formidable nemesis.

We know the rest of the story. The first church abandoned its first creed and favored its own logical conclusions. "God is not good. His word should not be taken with serious reverence." Ever since then the devil knows that he doesn't need persecution to destroy God's Church. He only needs its members to loosen their grip on the revealed Word of God. He needs them to abandon their faithful creeds.

Creeds have always been the bedrock for the church's teachings. Hebrew word **יָדָה** translated "confess" appears in the context of praise, thanksgiving, and teaching. The New Testament Greek word **ὁμολογέω** for "confess" or "acknowledge" refers to God's people taking a stand and openly declaring what they believe. It is used in connection with teaching and evangelizing. The New Testament **μαρτυρία** "witness" shares an authoritative testimony based on divine revelation. All such confessions of faith are formulated and shared with an evangelical intent for all who might listen, "so that you may also believe." (John 19:35)

We are "surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us testifying their faith. Believers have always used creeds because they are designed to be clear and useful testimonies to the truth. Some creeds, like the *Shema*, are taken directly from Scripture's words. For thousands of years the refrain **שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד** "Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4) has been repeated to affirm the oneness of God. It is a creed. Jesus

invited and challenged his disciples to formulate and share creeds. When the apostle Peter articulated his confession “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” (Matthew 16:16) he was in brief confessing what he knew to be true. Jesus reminded Peter that his confession grew directly from divine revelation: “This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17) Orthodox creeds stand upon such revelations and derive their power from God. Jesus affirmed that Peter’s brief creed was both useful and powerful. “On this rock (*your confession*) I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:18) A similar confession is the acronym *ixthus*. It was taken from the Greek word for fish to convey the truth that “Jesus Christ God’s Son (is) our Savior.” It is one of the earliest known authoritative expressions of faith after the time of apostles. It is a creed faithful to the revealed Word. The Apostle Paul perpetuated several creeds which were already well-known by the middle of the first century. He passed on brief statements faith which he called upon all to accept as faithful. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance πιστὸς ὁ λόγος καὶ πάσης ἀποδοχῆς ἄξιος: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15) Paul also wrote hymns or creeds for the early church which summarized the faith centered on the revelation of the Word made flesh.

“Undeniably, great is the mystery of godliness:

He was revealed in flesh,
was justified in spirit,
was seen by messengers,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.” (EHV 1 Timothy 3:16)

Some portions of his creeds are found in parts of the Nicene Creed, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4)

Creeds are sometimes written to be clear, sometimes written to be memorable. The church has found poetic creeds useful for teaching and for worship. Consider the *Te Deum*, a liturgical creed of the early church which is rich in doctrine and has been useful in worship for proclaiming numerous important doctrinal truths. Who could argue this trinitarian text of praise is still not useful for confession of faith and worship? It is a uniquely formulated, authoritative confession of the church, because it is based on the revealed Word and full of poetic pictures from Scripture about the Trinity and God’s plan of salvation.

We praise you, O God, we acclaim you as Lord; all creation worships you, Father everlasting. To you all angels, all the powers of heaven, cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of heavenly hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory. The glorious company of apostles praise you. The noble fellowship of prophets praise you. The white robed army of martyrs praise you. Throughout the world the holy Church acclaim you: Father of majesty unbounded, your glorious, true, and only Son, and the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide. You, Christ, are the King of glory, the eternal Son of the Father. When you became man to set us free, you humbled yourself to be born of a virgin. You overcame the sting of death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers. You sit at the right hand of God in the glory of the Father. We believe that you will come to be our judge. Come then, Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of your own blood, and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting. Amen. (4th century text, *Christian Worship Hymnal*)

The parts of the ancient liturgy, the ordinary (e.g. *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei*), are all creeds of the ancient Church which have been repeated in worship for millennia. In fact, all of the original hymns composed by Christians who have gone before us are poetically formulated confessions of faith. They are, in effect, each a creed. Consider the words of ancient and modern hymns. They may not precisely utilize the wording of Scripture, but they build upon the revealed Word as something concise, clear, and useful for spreading the faith. When believers sing along, they proclaim with the author “we believe this to be true.”

Finally, the creeds of the Church are a gift from our spiritual fathers for waging spiritual warfare. They surround us as the voice of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. When doubt, danger, and false doctrine assail the Church, its members do not have to reinvent the wheel. They need only recite a faithful creed and let it roll off their lips with divine power to demolish every demonic attack.

Perhaps it is because creeds are both necessary and useful for the Church that they have always been the target of attack by the Church’s enemies. In recent centuries there has been a continually increasing tide anticredalism influencing Christianity. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, famously cited his ignorance in the field of church history as a positive attribute which enabled him to be a better theologian. He boasted, “The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches.”

His statement reveals a general distrust for the historical Church and for its ancient creeds. No doubt the modern theologian versed in the history of the Church and its confessions of faith has encountered this same feeling of disdain toward churches of the past. “I don’t care for creeds, doctrines, and denominations,” says the confident young Christian man. “I have no creed but love and Jesus. Creeds and denominations just create intolerant and negative Christians.”

Such individuals are so quick to separate themselves from the history of the Church because they feel that in doing so they will free themselves from all of history’s entanglements and troubles. Will they? Or are they only setting themselves up to repeat it? Like Eve they are abandoning the battle lines in favor of what sounds reasonable. Like Adam they are dropping all responsibility to confess the faith and saying, “I don’t know. I’m with her, but I’m not getting involved in this affair with words.”

Many pastors are tempted to take the same route when their knowledge of the original languages, biblical history, and culture of the ancient Church are met with a mix of indifference and scorn. They are regarded as overly-educated theologians who cannot be trusted because they blindly follow the creeds of the Church without opening their eyes to their own interpretations. “What could I ever learn by asking the fathers?” they are asked with arrogant pride.

This wave of mistrust towards churches of the past is not without cause. There have been many who have distorted the truth and misrepresented the teachings of Scripture. History is riddled with the voices of countless lying prophets. But there remains still the cloud of witnesses which surrounds us. Is that cloud so foggy that we are unable to find the faithful voices of the past that are worth repeating? On the contrary, it contains many clear and faithful witnesses who shine like a bright light for today’s Christian. To characterize the early centuries of the Christian church as altogether lost, or merely seeking to create discord with their words, is to take a conceited view of self and short-sighted view of history. It overlooks the Holy Spirit’s working. We are not the only ones to have and hold the truth. Christ has built

his Church on the teachings of his apostles and prophets. He is still building his church. And he will continue to build his Church. He has always done this despite all false teachings and misguided traditions which may arise out of visible churches.

The lies of such visible churches are precisely the reason why creeds are so necessary. False teaching needs a proper response. It will not do for the bride of Christ to toss up her hands in defeat and say, "Who am I to speak? God will do it without me." Nor can she take the passive road like Adam and simply say, "I'm with them. What they say." A creed must be formulated, repeated, and grasped as the bedrock of the Church's faith. She must speak in the face of false teaching. God calls her upon to speak. He commands her to confess.

His command to confess the faith is his divine solution to the Church's greatest peril. Adam and Eve abandoned their creed and in doing so abandoned life itself. False teachings left unchallenged lead to uncertainty, uncertainty leads to silence, and silence leads to death. "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33)

In the past, when doctrinal discord threatened to destroy the Church, faithful witnesses always stepped forward with a response. Sometimes that response was spontaneous, sometimes it was planned. Sometimes that response was the small voice of an individual, other times it was a large gathering invited to speak as one. They gave a clear, authoritative testimony to the truth – a creed. For example, Paul once cited the popular Corinthian creed "I have the right to do anything," (1 Corinthians 6:12) and then in turn provided the Christian's response, "you are not your own, you were bought at a price, therefore honor God with your body." (1 Cor 6:20). The false church can speak, and it has shown that it can speak loudly. Nonetheless, the true church will always have a response that is worth repeating – a creed.

Those who have an aversion to creeds will always struggle to find their voice. A man belonging to a non-denominational church once confided, "I just wish I could explain what I believe and why I believe it." He was smothered by the pressures to find truth within himself and on the basis of his own personal experience. The experience of the Church of the past was foreign to him. It was as though he was being taught not to rely on the wheel and instead to come up with his own invention because the wheel had a corrupted design. When shown the confessions and creeds of the Evangelical Lutheran Church he could only look at them with suspicion and say, "These are not my creeds."

Author L. Charles Jackson captures the value of creeds such as the Nicene.

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.¹

This essay aims to demonstrate that the proper response to confusion, heterodoxy, and uncertainty is not to flee from creeds and councils, but to embrace them. The ecumenical creeds and councils of the ancient church defend the truth. The proper response to the numerous doctrines and denominations

¹ L. Charles Jackson, *Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 8.

that divide is to say all the more clearly and confidently, "This is my creed." And even better, to echo with the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, "This is *our* creed." Faithful creeds such as the Nicene Creed are not the cause of doctrinal controversy. They are God's answer to it. Each individual Christian is called to step up alongside the bride of Christ and say, "We believe..."

Part 1 – The Need for Creeds

For discussion groups:

1. Discuss: How often does your congregation use ancient or modern creeds of the Church?
2. What are the benefits of having a hymn function as a creed? Can you think of any suggestions for hymns which could be sung alongside or even occasionally in place of the ecumenical creeds used in worship?
3. List at least three reasons some Christians might give for trying to avoid creeds.
4. Explain why creeds are unavoidable.
5. Give at least three reasons why creeds are a necessary and useful gift.
6. Agree / Disagree: The ancient liturgical ordinary is essentially an ancient creed passed on through use in worship.
7. Appraise the "Te Deum" as an ancient creed.
8. How would you respond to someone who says that creeds are just an invention of the church?
9. How can a worship planner increase a congregation's appreciation for the "great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) which they hear during the service?

Part 2 – Catalyst for the Nicene Creed

Once Satan had convinced Adam and Eve to abandon their creed, he was able to employ new tactics against the Church: persecution. His success was immediately apparent to Adam and Eve after they witnessed the death of Abel. It was the first visible fulfillment of God's prophecy, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers." (Genesis 3:15) Ever since then the devil has used threats and dangers to silence the creeds of the faithful. These persecutions are a clear fulfillment of the apostle John's vision of the beast out of the earth. (Revelation 11) The devil plainly seeks to destroy and kill those who faithfully witness to the truth.

Rome's persecution of the early church fulfilled prophecy, and it led to many terrible deaths. Victims of those attacks died for their testimony, but they did so with a clear witness that echoed creeds such as the Apostles' Creed, "I Believe..." Certainly there were struggles against false teachings during those first centuries. However, the greatest threat was persecution by the rulers of this world who despised the Christian Church. It was out of this background that the Nicene Creed suddenly emerged. Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea who chronicled the early history of the church, recorded how many in the motley crew gathered for the council of Nicaea had come out of the great persecution. He noted that some had visible signs of their previous trials such as missing eyes or hands. It was a sight for sore eyes.

However, three centuries after Herod the Great ordered the massacre at Bethlehem, the world's persecution came to an abrupt halt. After his own great military struggle, Constantine began his reign as Emperor in 304 AD. By 312 he had fully secured power over the Roman Empire by winning a decisive battle. Prior to the battle he claimed to have had a vision of the cross. From that vision came the famous phrase *in hoc signo vinces*, "in this sign you will conquer." Constantine won the battle and proceeded to bet all his chips and all his empire on the Christian faith. Upon securing his position as sole emperor he decreed the Christian faith to be a legitimate faith of the entire empire and free from all state persecution.

It is difficult for today's Christian to imagine the effect of a world-wide persecution of the Church coming to a sudden halt and making a complete reversal. Eusebius understandably burst out in excessive adulation when he referred to the new emperor. He described the euphoria for Christians at the time of Constantine's victory and beginning of his imperial reign. And he did so with unabashed flattery for the emperor.

But Constantine, the mightiest victor, adorned with every virtue of piety, together with his son Crispus, a most God-beloved prince, and in all respects like his father, recovered the East which belonged to them; and they formed one united Roman empire as of old, bringing under their peaceful sway the whole world from the rising of the sun to the opposite quarter, both north and south, even to the extremities of the declining day.

All fear therefore of those who had formerly afflicted them was taken away from men, and they celebrated splendid and festive days. Everything was filled with light, and those who before were downcast beheld each other with smiling faces and beaming eyes. With dances and hymns, in city and country, they glorified first of all God the universal King, because they had been thus taught, and then the pious emperor with his God-beloved children.

There was oblivion of past evils and forgetfulness of every deed of impiety; there was enjoyment of present benefits and expectation of those yet to come. Edicts full of clemency and laws

containing tokens of benevolence and true piety were issued in every place by the victorious emperor.

Thus after all tyranny had been purged away, the empire which belonged to them was preserved firm and without a rival for Constantine and his sons alone. And having obliterated the godlessness of their predecessors, recognizing the benefits conferred upon them by God, they exhibited their love of virtue and their love of God, and their piety and gratitude to the Deity, by the deeds which they performed in the sight of all men.²

It was the start of a new era, and they all knew it.

Constantine desired that his newly attained empire be absolutely united on all fronts. He didn't just want political unity, but religious unity. The Edict of Milan (313) made Christianity a legal religion. Several following edicts supported the Christian faith. An edict in 321 even declared Sunday to be an official day of rest from all state activity. Under Constantine's growing influence the Roman Empire increasingly assumed a Christian air.

There was a disruption, however, in the apparent religious unity which Constantine craved. It sprang up and took root in the church of a prominent Egyptian city, Alexandria. In 319 a presbyter in the city named Arius began to openly spread divisive doctrine. Arius, regarded by many as a tall and persuasive figure, convinced his followers to take a strong stance on his creed. His teaching began to take hold of hearts with a short and simple mantra: "There was once when he was not." It was one of his creeds, referring to the person of Jesus. It asserted that Jesus was not an eternal being, but a part of creation. The mantra was repeated by crowds which marched the streets of Alexandria and reportedly even marked doctrinal graffiti on city structures. It encapsulated the core teaching of Arius which stood in opposition to the revealed Word: that Jesus was less than fully divine.

By 321 the synod in Alexandria had charged Arius with heresy. He was removed from office and excommunicated. That action, however, only generated more sympathizers for Arius. They considered him to be a victim and the Alexandrian church leaders to be bigots. The persecution of Christians had for a time ended, but the battle for the truth had not. The excommunication of Arius only temporarily halted his efforts to spread his teaching. A clear and authoritative response, a creed, was needed for ongoing combat.

When the religious unrest escalated Constantine became aware of the growing division in his empire. It is evident at this point that the emperor himself was not even certain what he believed regarding the person of Jesus. It is clear, however, that he desired to find a solution. His reasons may have been in part personal, but they were also most certainly political. He wanted to see Christianity united within his empire. Constantine's creed and goal as emperor was, "one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor." With this clear purpose in mind he called for the historic council convened in 325 at Nicaea, which was located in present day Turkey.

Such an action was not new in the Church. When doctrinal controversies arose the Church formulated responses to refute error and affirm what was based on Scripture. This does not mean it created new doctrines. Rather it made its position clear. Consider the New Testament's first truly ecumenical council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. Although they did not form a creed, they did address controversy and

²Eusebius Pamphili (Of Ceasarea) *Church History of Eusebius Pamphili (Book 10, chapter 9)*

sent out a letter which was intended to be shared with all believers. There was precedent for provincial councils to gather in the ancient church in order to settle religious disputes. However, up to this time there had never been a council of all the Christian provinces in the entirety of the Roman Empire. Constantine made that possible.

Some might argue that the support from the emperor made the Nicene Creed the result of political pressures and political influence. Of course, it was the Lord who had really made it all possible. The prophet Daniel makes clear that, “(God) changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.” (Daniel 2:21) This call for an ecumenical council in 325 was no less the working of God than the overthrow of Nebuchadnezzar’s dynasty in Daniel’s time to return the captives from exile. God positioned an emperor like Constantine, one with naïve imparity and a yearning desire to unify his empire, in order to have him call for the first ecumenical council just when it was needed the most.

Furthermore, those who only see Constantine the Politician behind the Nicene Creed’s formation fail to see the influential role held by the orthodox theologians at the council. This was not Constantine’s creed. In fact, Constantine would waver in his support of the council’s final decrees and several emperors after him would be hostile towards the orthodox faith. Yet the Church would stay strong without an emperor’s support and endure despite those attacks. Constantine’s call for an ecumenical council and the resulting Creed was the Spirit’s working to preserve his Word and spread his Word amidst the waxing and waning of the world’s powers. To claim that Constantine’s influence on the world stage invalidates the Creed is akin to claiming that Caesar Augustus’ decree for a census invalidates the fulfillment of prophecy that the Messiah would be from Bethlehem. It was all God’s design for the good of his Church. Caesar Augustus was Caesar, but he was not in full control of the events of history. Nor was Constantine, even as he took the title of Caesar.

Such a lofty position was given by God in order to carry out a lofty task. Never before had there been an attempt to summon such a council. The goal was to have representatives from the churches in every part of the Roman Empire. Constantine strove for a truly ecumenical effort and invited over 1800 bishops. Just under four hundred were able to attend. Nonetheless, it was the largest and widest gathering of clergy up to that time. Their numbers swelled with attendant deacons and elders who desired to be present for the proceedings.³

Constantine had called the council and as the new Christian emperor he functioned as an enforcer of the council’s administration and its decrees. None of those at the council spoke to question his authority. He respected the bishops, and they in turn respected his presence. Constantine understood how to make a grand presentation. He also understood how to make clear what his position as Emperor was in the proceedings. For example, he had a throne positioned in the hall near all of the bishops. This throne was clearly set in the highest place of prominence. But who did he place on such an exalted throne? He had a copy of the gospels “seated” upon it. In addition, he did not actively participate in the theological discussions during the council. He set a precedent for future ecumenical councils of the Church when he let the leaders among the bishops, titled as synod presidents, direct the theological debating. Eusebius

³This first ecumenical council consisted of the pastoral overseers, “bishops,” with certain bishops serving as the “synod presidents.” These bishops were chosen within their own provinces and represented those they served, making the council a voice for the entire church throughout the empire. For more on the structure and make-up of the councils of the ancient church see *Appendix I Councils of the Ancient Church*.

records that Constantine, “παρεδίδου τὸν λόγον τοῖς τῆς συνόδου προέδροις (handed over the matter to the synod presidents)”⁴ Though the laity and presbyters did not have a seat in the discussions, one must remember that the bishops were elected to serve and in a sense were representing the people they served. The emperor wanted each side to present their teaching and offer their creed. He invited Arius, who only held the title of presbyter, to voice his case at the council on several occasions. Several bishops within the Arian camp of teaching also presented their cases during the council.

Arius, a man who clearly understood the power of poetry, first presented his case by chanting a poem which he had composed as a creed. This effort, however, was not met with great enthusiasm. His basic teaching insisted that the Father and the Son do not share the same divine characteristics. He reasoned that since the Son is “begotten of the Father” he cannot be God from eternity. He appealed to the Scriptural references which indicate Jesus is beneath the Father as a Son and a servant. He concluded that Jesus must be called a creature and that he was generated out of non-existence like the rest of creation.

The fundamental weakness of Arius’ teaching was that he sought to apply human experience to the nature of God. His approach was more of a mythology than a theology. In the same way that the Greeks formed their ideas about God from human experience Arius built part of his theology from human experience. He concluded that if the Son is “begotten of the Father” he must be begotten in the similar fashion in which a human child is begotten, namely, at a certain moment in time. Therefore, he concluded, there was a time when the Son did not exist.

God exists, however, outside of time. He is eternal. A theological approach is the only way to properly understand God, not a mythological approach. Theology takes what God has revealed about himself to explain truths which the human experience cannot fully comprehend. That is exactly what the orthodox fathers of Nicaea set out to do in response to Arius.

Athanasius was only a newly ordained deacon in Alexandria at the onset of Arius’ teachings. But he accompanied bishop Alexander of Alexandria and soon became a leading voice behind the opposition to Arius. Unlike Arius, Athanasius was a young man who did not stand out in a crowd. In fact, he was so short in stature that his opponents often ridiculed him for it. Yet his faithful stance and firm witness to Scripture made him stand far taller in the pages of history. He stood upon the revealed Word. Faithful to the Word he chose to take a theological approach to the debate. Rather than relying on a man-centered understanding of God he allowed Scripture to present the wonderful and mysterious truth about the person of Jesus. He saw the clear texts in Scripture regarding the divine nature of Christ - his divine titles, his divine attributes, divine works, and the divine honor ascribed to him. They all pointed him to the undeniable revelation of the Scriptures: Jesus is fully divine from eternity.

Another strength of Athanasius and the orthodox Nicaea fathers was their soteriological emphasis in the debate. Athanasius understood that the question "Who is Jesus?" is inseparably linked to the question "How can I be saved?" Any discussion on the person of Jesus would be a discussion centered on God’s plan of salvation. The church fathers of Nicaea were not distracted from this important truth by the many questions sparked by Arius’ line of reasoning. If they had, we would have a Creed that is devoid of real meaning for sinners. Instead they directly tied every confession of the person of Jesus with his redemptive work for sinners. This is an important truth to remember when defending the faith. It is not

⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea *Church History of Eusebius*

enough to simply argue or prove the correct biblical doctrine. It needs to be taught and understood in light of God's plan of salvation.

Arius may have thought he was exposing a weakness in his opponent's theology by harping on the Scriptural references to Jesus' mortality and his servant-like lowliness. He contrasted Christ's limitations and weaknesses with the resplendent glory of the Father. Sadly, he was blind to the foolishness of the gospel. Instead of trying to refute the weakness and lowliness of Jesus, Athanasius and the orthodox camp embraced it. The weakness, lowliness, and mortality of Christ only further enhanced the gospel message. The glorious Son of God became the lowly Son of Man in order to serve and to give up his life as a ransom.

Ironically Arius' attempt to grasp at contradictions in the person of Jesus only assisted the orthodox camp in highlighting the amazing truth of the plan of salvation. The orthodox camp, led by the bishop of Alexandria and only a handful of other bishops, began by pointing to the Scriptural proof-passages which cite Jesus' divinity. They then explained the Scriptural passages which presented Jesus as apparently lesser than the Father by referring to his state of humiliation. There was a time when Jesus lowered himself. The apostle Paul referred to the way in which Christ lowered himself in order to carry out his plan of salvation and he used words which no doubt had already been repeated as a type of creed. "(Christ Jesus) who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6–8)

The debates eventually led to each camp's proposed creed. The supporters of Arius presented their own creed first. It was rejected with strong disapproval. The eighteen bishops who signed it quickly abandoned their position. It became clear from the start that if Arius' teaching was to take hold, it would have to be through a vague and compromising creed.

To Constantine a compromise seemed like a promising solution. At the beginning of the debates the majority of the council was impartial. Many were ready to accept a Semi-Arian confession which would attempt to appease both sides. In an effort to bring consensus and quick and easy compromise, Constantine urged everyone to back an ancient Palestinian confession which acknowledged the divinity of Christ but did so in vague terms. A vast majority, 318 bishops, signed on to this idea. It left the question of Christ's divinity so wide open that even the Arian minority were ready to accept it. Eusebius of Caesarea favored such an approach and was hopeful for a Semi-Arian solution and compromise.

The orthodox fathers of Nicaea, however, held out against any compromise, insisting that any decree of faith ought to make clear that Arius' teachings were false. They understood that a creed which does not make a clear response to the false teaching it is meant to address is not a useful or faithful creed. Arius and his followers had focused on the Scriptural phrase, "only begotten." For this reason the formulators of the Creed intentionally included it. Yet they included important qualifiers to explain what Scripture meant by this phrase. Those qualifying clauses became the point of great contention in the council's debates. They had hit a nerve and it showed. At times the debate teetered on the brink of chaos as each side saw the growing demarcation each carefully chosen word created.

In the end it wasn't a single word that won the day. It was even less. Many might scoff at the idea, but the debate really did revolve around a single Greek ι iota . The orthodox fathers proposed the inclusion

of the word ὁμοούσιος (Latin consubstantialis), of the same essence. They did not pull this word directly from Scripture but found it a concise ecclesiastical Word to summarize the teachings of Scripture. The word was not invented by the council but had already long found use in the church by others such as Origen. This was a word which the Arians hated because it outright contradicted their teaching. Some desired a compromise by adding the Greek iota to make the confession say that Jesus is ὅμοι-ούσιος (of *like* essence) instead of is ὁμο-ούσιος (of the *same* essence). This did not appease the far-left Arian camp, but it did allow the Semi-Arian middle camp to create room for a compromise. Arius and his supporters would have preferred ἕτερο-ούσιος (*different* in essence) but the compromise of ὅμοι-ούσιος (like essence) would have been a victory for his camp, nonetheless.

This single iota caused a great deal of contention. All those present knew it was a historical event and knew the importance of their final decisions. Seven weeks passed with debates and discussions. In the end the stubborn refusal of the orthodox bishops to compromise won the day. Hosius of Cordova presented a confession which included the controversial “homoousias” (of the *same* essence). The final consensus was nearly unanimous. For the first time in recorded history an ecumenical council meant to represent all of the known Christian world had formulated a joint confession of faith and signed onto it.

Although later Latin translations changed the wording to “I believe” the Creed was originally written with the expression “We believe.” It was meant to be shared as one voice. Even Eusebius of Caesarea, who had from the start leaned toward the middle ground of compromise, signed on after a day of deliberation. He included a letter to his diocese explaining why he chose to support the Creed and why they ought to join with him in saying “We believe.” Only two bishops at the council refused to sign it on the grounds that the council must first remove the condemnation against the Arian teachings attached to the end of the Creed. The council’s decision was ratified without them. Faithful creeds always bring division within the visible church.

The text of the 325 Nicaea Creed is much more abrupt than the confession used in the church today.⁵ It focused on the doctrinal dispute at hand, namely the person of Jesus Christ and his deity. It also included a condemnation of the Arian heresy. The Church saw the need, and it responded with a Creed. The 325 Nicene Creed stands out as the first of its kind and is arguably the most influential of all time. It stands above the chants of the followers of Arius because it lauds God himself as our Savior. It allows the mystery of the Trinity to stand clearly against the backdrop of God’s plan of salvation through the One who is “begotten not made, of one being with the Father.”

Today the Nicene Creed stands as more than a doctrinal statement on the divinity of Christ. It is a confession which every believer ought to delight in reciting. The formulators of the Creed wanted to answer more than the question of who Jesus is. They wanted to make clear why he left his divine glory to take on human flesh and the form of a servant. That answer fills the pages of Scripture, “God so loved the world.” Love was the reason behind the incarnation. Love “for us.” When the Creed is recited today believers echo the cloud of witnesses with delight and join with them in saying, “We believe... *for us and for our salvation* he came down and was incarnate.”

⁵ See *Appendix II* to compare the text of this 325 Creed in Greek and English versions with the augmented version of the Creed from the Council at Constantinople in 381.

Part 2 – The Catalyst for a Creed

For discussion groups:

1. Some might contend that a creed has to be personal because you can't know what everyone believes or force someone to believe something. How does the use of the first-person plural "we believe" bolster the use and purpose of the Nicene Creed?
2. Agree or Disagree: "The Nicene Creed is the confession of the Church (The Holy Christian Church)."
3. Group Exercise: The Fathers of Nicaea made sure not to lose track of God's plan of salvation. They created a meaningful confession by tying in each part about the person of Jesus with his work of salvation. They also chose to use the same vocabulary (when possible or necessary) as their opponents so that they could clarify terms.

Pick one of the following topics. Have someone in your group list the false teachings that might be taught under that topic. Have the group briefly formulate a creed which ties in each point of response with God's plan of salvation.

- "A Creed on Marriage"
- "A Creed Regarding Church Fellowship"
- "A Creed Regarding Respect for Human Life"
- "A Creed on the Real Presence in the Sacrament"
- "A Creed Regarding Christian Freedom"

Part 3 – The Creed Isn't Complete?

The Council of Nicaea closed with great fanfare. Constantine held a celebratory banquet for all attendees. Imperial edicts were issued supporting the Creed. The two Egyptian bishops who refused to recant their Arian stance were banished with Arius to Illyria. Arius' books were destroyed and his followers were branded as enemies of the Christian faith.

However, the work was not complete. It is one thing to formulate a Creed; it is another to make it a living confession. The 325 Creed of Nicaea expressed, "we believe." After the council it was time to discover who really wanted to be included under "we."

The Nicene Creed and its first-person plural affirmation, "we believe," is more than just an assertion of the ancient Church. It is even more than the affirmation of the centuries of believers who followed. It is the expression of the very character of the kingdom of God. Christ's body is made up of many parts, and all belong to him, confess him, and proclaim him as Lord. The Church has always been about many being one in Christ and the many who are unified by faith in him.

Being united to the Church also means sharing in suffering for the sake of the gospel. After the death of bishop Alexander in 328, Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria. When he refused to reinstate Arius, he was condemned by many, including two different councils led by Semi-Arian bishops. One of these provincial councils, centered at Tyre, was headed by the historian Eusebius as their synod president. Even though he had signed the Nicene Creed, he did not hold to it. In 336 Constantine was persuaded that Athanasius, with his staunch and unrelenting orthodoxy, was a disturber of the peace of the church. Athanasius' enemies portrayed him as someone who was not a team player. Constantine banished him to Treves in Gaul in 336. To make matters worse the emperor, always seeking to heal and unite his empire, had recalled Arius from exile in 335 and welcomed him back into fellowship at the church at Constantinople. The emperors' desire to show clemency toward heresy meant growing challenges for orthodoxy.

This wouldn't be the first time Athanasius faced opposition. He was exiled five times by the various emperors after Nicaea. The supporters of Arianism found new footholds in unexpected places. Even one of the bishops at Rome, Felix II, offered support of Semi-Arianism. Bishop Hosius, the man who had presented the original formation of the Creed, and who was nearing one hundred years-old, was temporarily swayed to uphold Arianism. Athanasius was slandered by various enemies, charged with murder and mutilation of his opponents. Even his five-foot tall stature was considered fair game as they mocked him with the title, "little black dwarf." On one occasion he was chased out of the pulpit by imperial troops who broke in to arrest him. This small, persecuted individual became the iconic champion still holding to his Creed, faithfully holding to the revealed Word. There is a lot of truth behind the expression which developed from all this: *Athanasius contra mundum*, "Athanasius against the world."

Still today Athanasius remains under attack. Revisionist authors seeking to rediscover history in a different type of light take aim at Athanasius as a villain. He is presented by them as an antagonist who prevented the free-thinking spirits in the early church from finding their own interpretation of the Christian faith. These revisionist historians dig into history supposing they can uncover a biased reporting of events and identify the underdog (Arius) as the real hero. James T. Dennison remarks how

ironic it is that modern revisionists should choose to slander Athanasius in order to prove their case against him.

Revisionism is an academic pastime. Without being altogether crass about some of these recent studies, I must admit to an element of skepticism when Athanasius, for example, is labeled a thug (as in "gangster"). This shocking accusation seems to be taken from a page of his 4th century detractors (recall, he was alleged to have cut off a priest's hand, the damning appendage waved about by his Arian enemies as proof positive, only to be unmasked themselves as liars and brigands when Athanasius produced the priest—alive with hand intact!)⁶

The enemies of the cross have only two basic tactics: persecution and false teaching. The devil failed to maintain persecution at the rise of Constantine's reign. He then tried his hand at false teaching through Arius. Once an orthodox Creed stood in opposition to that false teaching, he once again took up the drumbeat of persecution.

Athanasius endured persecution and continued to contend for the deity of Christ. God spared him again and again and allowed him safe returns to preaching and defense of the truth. Alas, even someone as iconic as Athanasius cannot go on in perpetual defense of the truth. In order for that to happen the church needs a creed which it can hold onto throughout the ages. The orthodox fathers needed to hold onto the Creed as a precious gift which would keep them united against attack. Athanasius did not live long enough to see the full fruit of his labors. Emperor after emperor ranged from orthodox, to Semi-Arian, to Arian and pagan. The anti-Nicene party had long split into two camps, Arian and Semi-Arian and they competed against one another. On the other hand, the Creed of 325 was never revoked and many of the orthodox subscribers remained faithful to the Word -and generally united by the Creed. The Creed was not overturned. On the contrary, the Councils of Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431, and Chalcedon in 451 solemnly reaffirmed it.

After a forty-year hold in the capital city of Constantinople, Arianism finally lost its foothold. God provided an emperor who was educated in the Nicene faith and who ruled for a long period of stability, Theodosius I (379–395). One of his first orders of business was to drive out the anti-Nicene advocates from the city and depose them of their positions. He then called for a council in Constantinople which was only comprised of those in fellowship with the orthodox church. This synod, comprised of a mere 150 faithful Greek bishops, had no trouble affirming the Creed of Nicaea. Although the Latin church did not have any representative it did not take long for it to give consensus to the decisions of the council of Constantinople.

The ecumenical council of 381 did not set out to change the Nicene Creed. It did, however, augment its content. It produced what many consider to be a parallel or corresponding creed. The Holy Spirit had not been under discussion during the council of Nicaea in 325. Thus the Creed's third article ended abruptly with, "We believe in the Holy Spirit." Using the revealed truths of Scripture the council of Constantinople added the final lines which everyone is familiar with today. It also removed the closing anathema which directly mentioned the Arian heresy. It expanded and further clarified the descriptions of the Son and his work. These additions and this change in the conclusion made it all the more useful as a tool for sharing the faith. (See Appendix II) This is why some refer to the Creed of 381 as the

⁶ James T. Dennison, Jr. *Arius 'Orthodoxos'; Athanasius 'Politicus': The Rehabilitation of Arius and the Denigration of Athanasius* *Kerux Journal* 17.2: A5. [accessed January 2020: <http://www.kerux.com/doc/1702A5.asp>]

Constantinopolitan Creed. Some argue that this creed is not the Nicene Creed because of all the changes from the council of 325. However, the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon affirmed its validity in 451 without dispute, and the additions made at Constantinople in 381 became widely accepted by decree and consent of the churches throughout the East and the West.

Emperor Theodosius immediately ratified the decrees of the council. He declared that all churches should be given up to bishops who believed in the equal divinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and who stood in church fellowship. Arianism lost its standing in the East and West and never rose again as a major threat to the orthodox faith. Its teachings lingered, predominately in Spain and Gaul, but its influence continued to dwindle and nearly disappeared over the next two centuries.

The Creed has remained the same save for one other addition which appeared in later centuries. A number of Latin fathers desired to make it clear that the Spirit proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father. It appears that the word *filioque*, “and the son,” was being used in some of the Latin liturgy and Emperor Charlemagne attempted to persuade Pope Leo III to insert *filioque* in the creed, but he was unsuccessful. He then endeavored to have the word forced upon the Greek and Latin churches. In 589 the Synod of Toledo, a Latin non-ecumenical gathering, included the words *filioque* “and the son” to their Latin version of the Creed.

Scripture mentions the Spirit proceeding from the Father, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.” (John 15:26) However, it also mentions the Spirit as also proceeding from the Son. “Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.” (Acts 2:33) Both versions of the Creed, the one with “and the Son” and the one without it are theologically acceptable. Each expression is not mutually exclusive of the other. They may carry a different emphasis, but not a different doctrine of the Trinity.

Nonetheless, the insertion of the word into the Creed caused great contention. By the late ninth century a man named Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, widened the rift. He not only affirmed the superiority of the original Creed formula from 381 but denounced the use of *filioque* as heretical. The word became the center stage for a large battle of ecclesiastical politics between the East and West. After the turn of the first millennium Pope Benedict VIII inserted *filioque* into the version of the Nicene Creed used in the Latin liturgy. The Eastern Church had not been invited to discuss such an addition.

In the end it wasn't so much a debate about the Holy Spirit but an argument over ecclesiastical authority. The bishop at Rome may have had good Scriptural reason to allow the inclusion of *filioque*, but he did not have the right to exercise authority over the Eastern churches and alter the Creed. The controversy over this word contributed to the split between the Eastern and Western churches. In reality both the East and West had already grown so politically and culturally apart that this single word became a symbolic battleground. It was Scripturally justifiable to use the word, but the way it was added by the Latin church was not done in accord with unity and love. It was perceived, rather, as an ecclesiastical power-play.

While it is unwise to change or add to an ecumenical Creed, it is at times necessary to update translations of the Creed. Language changes over time. For this reason the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod worked hard to explain to its members why it picked the translation used in the 1993 publication *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. The version used in *Christian Worship* comes from

the English Language Liturgical Consultation, ELLC, which is an ecumenical group. To aid in understanding, the hymnal committee members chose to use “fully human” instead of “truly human.” They also replaced the word “catholic” with “Christian” because catholic is most often understood as Roman Catholic though it originally meant “universal.” With that translation choice the “we believe” of the Creed can be properly understood. It continues to echo in every language, tribe, and culture around the world. The Nicene Creed exists for all Christians as a gift, passed on by our spiritual forefathers. It is the fruit of years of faithfulness to the revealed Word.

Part 3 – The Creed Isn't Complete?

For discussion groups:

1. A need was perceived to reaffirm and augment the Nicene Creed many years after its original formation. What does that say about all creeds and our use of creeds?
2. Describe the divisions created by the Nicene Creed. Why should we expect (perhaps even design) other creeds to create division?
3. Evaluate the filioque controversy in light of Scripture. What mistakes do you see on both sides of the issue?
4. One might argue that there were other factors which led to the split between the Eastern and Western Church. Nonetheless the filioque controversy did play some part in it. What lesson does the filioque controversy leave for us regarding any alteration of an existing creed?
5. Not every attempt to clarify or add to a creed is wrong. Yet alterations or additions can be done in a divisive or foolish way. How might we best avoid pitfalls that come from the perceived need to augment or clarify a creed?
6. Discuss: A single word change to a part of the liturgy has the potential to divide the WELS.
7. Our church body took many steps to evaluate, explain, and educate WELS members regarding changes of wording in our 1993 hymnal. List some steps being taken by the current hymnal committee to avoid controversy over any necessary additions or changes to liturgical wording. What are some ways that you can help with this effort?
8. Appraise the following creeds found on websites of various WELS ministries. (Or include your own if your church's website has a statement of faith besides one of the Ecumenical Creeds.) Note that most websites are often designed to reach unchurched. Identify topics addressed in these brief statements of faith which the Nicene Creed did not necessarily aim to address. Discuss possible reasons behind any additional doctrines addressed.

1) <https://eternalrock.org/home>

The only True God is the Triune God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Humankind is totally corrupt, dead in sin and doomed to condemnation.

God, out of love, took pity on us and sent his Son to be our Savior.

Jesus Christ became true man by virgin birth.

He lived, died and rose again for us.

In this way, through faith in Christ, we are set free from sin.

God the Holy Spirit uses the Good News of this message to create faith and change lives.

Would you like more details? [\[Click Here\]](#)

<Click Here directs to <http://www.wels.net/about-wels/doctrinal-statements>>

2) <https://www.lutheranchurchtucson.com/what-we-believe/>

(Part of beliefs on landing page) "We teach the pure Word of God."

(The beliefs page) SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH IS PART OF THE WELS SYNOD.

<beliefs page includes an embedded frame of the entire WELS website page "What We Believe">

3) <https://faithtacoma.com/about-us/beliefs>

In an age of chaos, we believe that God's love is the only constant.

In an age of anxiety, we believe that real peace comes from Jesus Christ.

In an age of confusion, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, without error.

In an age of doubt, we believe that Jesus is true God who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

In an age of arrogance, we believe that all people are sinful and, therefore, deserve God's punishment.

In an age of guilt, we believe that Jesus died on a cross to forgive our sins.

In an age of helplessness, we believe that Jesus removed the power of sin from our lives.

In an age of hopelessness, we believe that Jesus rose physically from death – and so we, too, will rise to live with him in heaven.

In an age of skepticism, we believe that God is at work in our lives through His Word (the Bible) and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

In an age of despair, we believe God's promises to heal and transform us.

In an age of violence, we believe that God calls us to embody His love in the world.

In an age of constant change, we believe in the unchanging Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

4) <http://www.stmarcus.org/church/about/we-believe>

We believe that God reveals himself to us through his Word, the Holy Bible, and that the changeless Gospel is divinely inspired, free of mistakes, contradictions or error.

We believe in the Triune God. One God, three persons; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through the innocent life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, anyone can be saved.

There is nothing we humans can do to earn our own salvation. The Holy Spirit calls us to Christ and to faith through the Word and baptism. He creates and sustains saving faith in Christ, and all who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Join us: Whatever your age or background, wherever you are in life's journey, we invite you to be a part of a Christian community and experience the joy of knowing and serving Jesus and his love for you. There is a place for you at St. Marcus. We rejoice when others share our faith in Jesus and join us in ministry and life together.

Part 4 Combating Errors Today – Conclusion

Some say that there is no orthodox Christian faith, but there are many valid Christian faiths. They contend the creeds which are called orthodox are only the ones which gained the political and social upper hand.

The Confessional Lutheran would have to disagree with this almost Darwinian evaluation of Church history. For one, faithful believers always go back to the source, namely God's Word, as the standard by which all teachings must be judged. In addition, the size of a church body or its level of acceptance does not make its teachings orthodox. Confessional Lutherans know this fact all too well. Worldly numbers and worldly might do not make right in the kingdom of heaven. On the contrary, "Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7:13-14) The orthodox Church has, in fact, long endured as the object persecution. Athanasius and many others from the great cloud of witnesses knew this all too well. (cf. Hebrews 11) There will certainly be divisions and schisms in the visible church. There will be political vying for power and theological undercutting of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the Church has always stood the test of time -not by might or sword, but by the working of the Lord.

Church history will always be a story of God's working. Comfort comes from knowing that God has preserved his Church and will continue to do so. Even as its walls seem to be crumbling, the Lord of the Church builds upon the unshakable rock and confession of Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The decision at Nicaea gives us a glimpse of that cloud of witnesses who built on that rock before us.

To toss aside their triumph would be as foolish as tossing out cherished family memories. Yet that is what some attempt to do today.

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.⁷

Thankfully there is something of a resurgence of interest in the history of the Church and in the ancient confession of the Church. Some are turning their attention to those who went before. It is a humbling thing to admit that one stands upon the shoulders of one's spiritual forefathers. But it is a necessary humility.

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 independence of thought. This, however, is not the Christian approach to life. Indeed, it is nothing more than arrogance cloaked in false piety.⁸

God has always directed his people to a humble mindset. He urges them to turn to previous generations of believers who testify about him. The song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 contains a reminder to hold to the teachings passed on by our fathers. The Lord is "a faithful God who does no wrong... Remember

⁷ D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9

⁸ L. Charles Jackson, *Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 4–5.

the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.” (Dt 32:3-7)

Some are recognizing the problem of a historical disconnect from the church fathers of Nicaea and today’s Christian culture. Instead of embracing the great cloud of witnesses who went before, many desire to walk alone.

My instinct is to believe that few American Protestants and fewer still evangelical Protestants would readily include a belief in the church as part of their gospel confession.

To many Protestants, this portion of the creed seems believable, but not a vital part of their Christian confession. This way of thinking emphasizes that the gospel has to do almost exclusively with individual salvation, and the church is not essential to this individual experience. The church certainly plays a role, but it is not central. It is hard then in this context to imagine that the average evangelical Christian confesses the “church” as part of their life-and-death creed.

This is not intended to belittle evangelicals’ ideas nor decry their emphasis on the individual as completely wrong. Still, we should note that such a mindset is a striking historical break with the confession of the earliest Christians and with the most ancient ecumenical creed of Nicaea. Like it or not, many evangelical Protestants are at odds with the faith of our fathers at this point.

Speaking as a former member of exactly this kind of church, I can testify to a kind of ethos that is at best lukewarm to the necessity of the church as a vital part of our confession of faith. Indeed, at times it appears that some evangelical Protestants are involved in what is sometimes identified as the “church-growth” movement, which has even displayed a downright hostility to the notion of an institutional church.⁹

This hostility toward the Church of the past manifests itself with an attack on creeds and denominations. Those who hold to Creeds are treated with contempt, like Athanasius, as “disturbers of the peace of the church.” The entire church is viewed with suspicion and is mocked from within by those who intend to fix it by erasing its history.

The Church is always, by necessity and by command of Christ, going to form a visible body of believers who gather regularly around the gospel. It is true that faith in Jesus is very personal. However, the personal nature of faith does not mean each individual is free from belonging to a larger body. God desires that each believer gather with fellow believers regularly. Emphasizing individualism over body and community tears down the work of the Church and the ministry of the gospel.

After all, the devil knows that he doesn’t need persecution to destroy God’s church. He’ll use it if he can, but he knows he only has to get the members of God’s Church to loosen their grip on the revealed Word. He needs them to abandon their faithful creeds.

The Church confessed in the Nicene Creed is not the work of man, but the Spirit-wrought work of God. Yet man is offended that God would use five-foot tall human beings like Athanasius to be champions of his gospel. Thus man will belittle and mock the orthodox faith in favor of sectarian small groups and non-creedal, non-denominational bodies. Christian Hip-Hop artist Shai Linne laments the way that some fellow musicians try to reach the unchurched by attacking the Church.

⁹ Ibid 105–106

Because brothers in your camp causing lots of confusion
I love them as brothers in Christ, but not their conclusions
They wanna reach the world? By all means keep pursuing it
But tell me, why they gotta diss the church while they're doing it?¹⁰

Far from dissing or dismissing the Church the Creed affirms it is as holy. Despite all its struggles and trials, it remains forever holy. God calls his people to be part of a world-wide body of believers who are made holy through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit which they received in their baptism. They are part of something bigger. Scripture declares it. The Creed teaches and confesses it.

The Church and its creeds are not the propagators of racism and tribalism. They are God's remedy for it. They are not the cause of division. They are the proper and heavenly mandated response to it. The Church is a beautiful thing, and creeds are the glue which help bind it together in the gospel -the Nicene Creed being one of strongest and most widely applied throughout history.

Author Daniel Williams laments the disconnect that many Christians feel from the early church. They fail to see the real treasure of truths formulated and expressed by theologians, martyrs, and the many witnesses to the faith who came before.

I was once informed with kindly intentions by the deacon of the first church I pastored that the study of the early creeds and councils is something that Catholics or Episcopalians do, but true Christians need only uphold the complete authority of the Bible and the empowering of the Holy Spirit in a personal way. However liberating this may sound, such a position has served to isolate the current Christian experience of God for many believers, disconnecting them from the rich heritage of the church.¹¹

Creeds, especially the ecumenical Creeds of the Church, are that consistent voice which echoes throughout the centuries for all believers and unbelievers. The Church speaks. Its confession is clear. It is heard in the preaching and praise of each member. And it is echoed with one voice in this Creed.

Those who love the Church because they know the love of their Triune God will still echo with countless before them: "We Believe."

¹⁰ Shai Linne *Still Jesus*, Released July 21, 2017

¹¹ Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, i

Part 4 – Combating Errors Today

For discussion:

1. The Formula of Concord and Augsburg Confession both appeal to the Nicene Creed. They clearly stated that they followed Scripture alone as the sole authoritative source of spiritual truth. What reasons might they have had for mentioning the Creed? Identify in which contexts the Nicene Creed can still be most useful today. In which context may it not serve as well for us to cite the Nicene Creed?
2. Why must we be careful not to appeal to the age or widespread appeal of a creed when trying to bolster its usefulness?
3. Agree / Disagree “A creed is only useful if it can summarize Scripture and build consensus for wide-spread usage.”
4. Explain how the Nicene Creed offers a practical tool... for worship...for evangelism.

Appendix I - Councils of the Ancient Church

What makes it ecumenical?

- Seven councils of the early Christian church are generally accepted as truly ecumenical: Two were held at Nicaea (325; 787), three at Constantinople (381; 553; 681), one at Ephesus (431), and one at Chalcedon (451)
- The emperors called for each council, but mostly presided over matters relating to the synod, not the theological debates. Constantine set a precedent when he handed over the theological discussions to the leaders among the bishops, titled as synod president.
- These councils were not an absolute representation of the entire Christian world. Laity and lower clergy were excluded from decisions. However, it must be remembered that the bishops of many of the churches were often elected by popular voice from the lower clergy to serve as regional and provincial overseers and in that sense represented the laity.
- Not all invited attended. For example, only about a fifth of the bishops invited to the first ecumenical council even attended. Edicts were read in Latin and in Greek. However, the ecumenical councils were held in the Greek language, in a Greek location, and included mostly Greek-oriented controversies. They consisted mostly in Greek members. The Latin church was represented, but only by a few delegates, often only a small percentage, sometimes not at all.
- Not every council's decision making was accepted by the church as a whole. The council of Ephesus, in 449, and the council of Sardica, in 343, for example, were both disregarded by the majority of the contemporary bishops and laity and thus cannot rightly be titled "ecumenical" since they did not receive widespread consensus and support of the church outside of the council meeting.
- Some councils were not a wide representation of the church but grew out of consensus from the rest of the church. The council of Constantinople in 381 for example contained only 150 Greek bishops and not a single Latin representative. However, by consent of the Latin church and the Eastern church it was raised to ecumenical rank within half a century.
- The emperors at times issued decrees to enforce each council's decision by way of banishment from the church. The council members usually followed the practice of echoing Acts 15:28 with each decreed resolution. From the third century provincial meetings (which still included predominately Latin) and on they included phrases such as *Visum est Spiritui Sancto et nobis*, thereby appealing to a divine authority behind each decision which the emperor was duty bound to support.
- *It is, therefore, not the number of bishops present, nor even the regularity of the summons alone, which determines the ecumenical character of a council, but the result, the importance and correctness of the decisions, and, above all, the consent of the orthodox Christian world.*¹²

Under the papacy?

- There were seven ecumenical councils from 325 to 867. Contrary to current Roman Catholic doctrine, the Roman papacy never convened or presided over any of the ecumenical councils of the early centuries. None of the seven ecumenical councils were called by the Bishop of Rome, but by the Byzantine emperors. Rome often only sent a delegation of two representatives, sometimes Rome had no representative present. The Roman bishops were never themselves present.
- Representatives from Rome seldom brought any recognized assertions to these councils with the first appearing only in the council of Chalcedon, in 451. Even then it submits to the authority of the Eastern bishops and the council's Greek members.
- The modern Roman papacy asserts there were eight ecumenical councils but is nearly alone in such an assertion.
- The Western church seldom even called for provincial councils. Most of these were called by the Eastern provinces.

¹² Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 330–334.

What about today?

- It is worth taking note that there are still groups within the Eastern, Roman, and Protestant churches which hope to form an eighth ecumenical council today, but these groups lack enough wide support and agreement to convene a truly ecumenical gathering.

A general description of the structure of the ancient councils follows:

Above the patriarchs, even above the patriarch of Rome, stood the ecumenical or general councils, the highest representatives of the unity and authority of the old Catholic church. They referred originally to the Roman empire, but afterward included the adjacent barbarian countries, so far as those countries were represented in them by bishops. They rise up like lofty peaks or majestic pyramids from the plan of ancient church history, and mark the ultimate authoritative settlement of the general questions of doctrine and discipline which agitated Christendom in the Graeco-Roman empire.

The synodical system in general had its rise in the apostolic council at Jerusalem, and completed its development, under its Catholic form, in the course of the first five centuries. Like the episcopate, it presented a hierarchical gradation of orders. There was, first, the diocesan or district council, in which the bishop of a diocese (in the later sense of the word) presided over his clergy; then the provincial council, consisting of the metropolitan or archbishop and the bishops of his ecclesiastical province; next, the patriarchal council, embracing all the bishops of a patriarchal district (or a diocese in the old sense of the term); then the national council, inaccurately styled also general, representing either the entire Greek or the entire Latin church (like the later Lateran councils and the council of Trent); and finally, at the summit stood the ecumenical council, for the whole Christian world. There was besides these a peculiar and abnormal kind of synod, styled σύνοδος ἐνδημοῦσα, frequently held by the bishop of Constantinople with the provincial bishops resident (ἐνδημοῦντες) on the spot.

In the earlier centuries the councils assembled without fixed regularity... in the middle of the third century, the churches of Asia Minor held regular annual synods, consisting of bishops and presbyters. From that time we find an increasing number of such assemblies in Egypt, Syria, Greece, Northern Africa, Italy, Spain, and Gaul. The council of Nicæa, A.D. 325, ordained, in the fifth canon, that the provincial councils should meet twice a year: during the fast season before Easter, and in the fall. In regard to the other synods no direction was given.

The ECUMENICAL councils were not stated, but extraordinary assemblies, occasioned by the great theological controversies of the ancient church. They could not arise until after the conversion of the Roman emperor and the ascendancy of Christianity as the religion of the state. They were the highest, and the last, manifestation of the power of the Greek church, which in general took the lead in the first age of Christianity, and was the chief seat of all theological activity.

-Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 330–334.

Appendix II -The Text of the Creed

First Council of Nicaea (325)		First Council of Constantinople (381)	
Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων ποιητὴν·	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.	Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων.	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of <i>heaven and earth</i> , and of all things visible and invisible.
καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς [μονογενῆ, τοὔτεστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ,] Φῶς ἐκ Φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ,	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;	Καὶ εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ , τὸν ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων , φῶς ἐκ φωτός, Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ, γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ·	And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the <i>only-begotten</i> Son of God, begotten of the Father <i>before all worlds (æons)</i> , Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο, [τὰ τε ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ γῆ,]	By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];	δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο·	by whom all things were made;
τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα καὶ σαρκωθέντα καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα,	Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;	τὸν δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα,	who for us men, and for our salvation, came down <i>from heaven</i> , and was incarnate <i>by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary</i> , and was made man;
παθόντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ, ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς,	He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;	σταυρωθέντα τε ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου, καὶ παθόντα καὶ ταφέντα, καὶ ἀναστάντα τῇ τρίτῃ ἡμέρᾳ κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, καὶ ἀνελθόντα εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς, καὶ καθεζόμενον ἐκ δεξιῶν τοῦ Πατρὸς,	he was <i>crucified for us under Pontius Pilate</i> , and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, <i>according to the Scriptures</i> , and ascended into heaven, and <i>sitteth on the right hand of the Father</i> ;

ἐρχόμενον κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς.	From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	καὶ πάλιν ἐρχόμενον μετ ὰ δόξης κρῖναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς·	from thence he shall come <i>again, with glory</i> , to judge the quick and the dead. ;
		οὐ τῆς βασιλείας οὐκ ἔσται τέλος.	<i>whose kingdom shall have no end.</i>
Καὶ εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα.	And in the Holy Ghost.	Καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ Κύριον , τὸ ζωοποιόν , τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον , τὸ σὺν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ συμπροσκυνούμενον καὶ συνδοξαζόμενον , τὸ λαλήσαν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν . Εἰς μίαν , ἀγίαν, καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν Ἐκκλησίαν · ὁμολογοῦμεν ἐν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν · προσδοκοῦμεν ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν, καὶ ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος. Ἀμήν.	And in the Holy Ghost, <i>the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father*</i> , <i>who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.</i>
[Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας, Ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, καὶ Πρὶν γεννηθῆναι οὐκ ἦν, καὶ ὅτι Ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων εγένετο, ἢ Ἐξ ἐτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι, ἢ κτιστόν, ἢ τρεπτόν, ἢ ἀλλοιωτόν τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ ἀγία καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία].	[But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.]		

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed

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¹³ All English are citations from the Holy Bible are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless indicated otherwise.