

WITNESS



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E x t r a c t



Why do we say the Nicene Creed every Sunday?

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First, the Creed is a succinct formulation of the core elements of the essential message of the Bible, namely, the gospel. After all, there is a lot in the Bible. The Holy Scriptures are a library of books, not a single book. The Old Testament contains 39 books (more if you add those accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, and even more if you add those accepted by Orthodox Churches). The New Testament contains 27 books. Among these books, we find a rich variety of writings. The Old Testament contains books of Law, history, prophetic writings, as well as other varied writings (Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, etc.). The New Testament contains Gospels, a history (Acts), letters, and even an apocalyptic vision (Revelation).

The Creed asks: what is the core of the gospel? The Creed picks up from Scripture those essential core elements that C. H. Dodd identified when he wrote:

The common and central tradition [of the New Testament] at its core what the New Testament itself calls the kerygma, or proclamation of the Gospel. In its most summary form the kerygma consists of the announcement of certain historical events in a setting which displays the

significance of those events. The events in question are those of the appearance of Jesus in history – His ministry, sufferings and death and His subsequent manifestation of Himself to His



credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum non factum, consubstantialem Patri, per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis. Et incarnatus est de Spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas; et ascendit in caelum, sedet ad dexteram Patris, et iterum venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos, cujus regni non erit finis. Et in Spiritum sanctum Dominum et vivificantem, qui ex Patre Filioque procedit; qui cum Patre et Filio simul adoriatur et glorificatur; qui locutus est per Prophetas. Et in unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam. Confiteor unum baptismum in remissionem peccatorum. Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venturi saeculi, amen.

*followers as risen from the dead and invested with the glory of another world – and the emergence of the Church as a society distinguished by the power and activity of the Holy Spirit, and looking forward to the return of its Lord as Judge and saviour of the world.*¹

That we say the Creed immediately

after the reading of God's Word, and the proclamation of the same, is no coincidence!

True, it doesn't tell us everything that Scripture tells us. Rather, the Nicene Creed gives us the core and presumes that we will "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the rest of the Scriptures, both New and Old Testament, to "flesh out" the fullness of our belief.

Second, the Nicene Creed tells what is essential within that core to keep the Church "on track". While the Apostles' Creed tells *me* what I need to believe as an individual to begin to grow as a Christian, the Nicene Creed tells *us* as a Church what the sine qua non of Christian belief is. In other words, the Nicene Creed reminds us what Scripture tells us we must believe for the Church to be and remain Christian.

Importantly, it tells us not just what *we* – say, St. George's, or Christians living in Ottawa,

or Canada, or even North America – must believe but what the whole Church across space and time has, must, and will believe to remain a Christian Church. The Nicene Creed reminds us that we do not say the Creed alone, but with believers past, present, and future, found in God's Holy Catholic Church to the East, North, South, and West.

But, if the Creed is essentially a dis-

tillation of the core proclamation of the gospel, then someone might ask: why don't we just read all of the Scriptures and learn what they say? That leads us to our *third* and final point: the Nicene Creed does not only reveal and underscore elements of the common core of Christian faith as revealed in the Scriptures, but, in light of important historical events and contexts, alerts us to ways that people have used parts of Scripture, rather than the whole, understood in light of that essential core, to call into question or misconstrue Christian faith.

In other words, the Creed is important in telling us how, over the early formative centuries in which Christian doctrine was being formed, Christians tried various doctrines that proved to be significantly less than Christian. The Creed, in other words, not only shows us the way to true belief, but warns us against the perennial ways in which Christian faith has been called into question, not only by those who made no claim to faith, but also by those who did!

So, the Nicene Creed not only points the way for right belief (i.e., orthodoxy) but also warns us against falling into errors, in some of the following ways:

1. The Creed reminds us that the God we worship is known to us only through our Lord Jesus Christ, and that He is to be known as Father and the same one who is Creator of heaven and earth. In doing so, it reminds us that there are many who have called into question God's Fatherhood, as well as His goodness, expressed in a creation that was made good. Subtly, it asks us to think: What must that original creation have been like? What must we -- man and woman -- have been like when God

first created us "very good"?

2. In harmony with the very creeds of Scripture itself, the Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus is Messiah and Lord, and that Jesus, as Messiah, has died, is risen, and will come again. In doing so, it also reminds us that some have said and continue to say Jesus is not the Messiah but only a prophet, one among many; that there are some who have said and continue to say that Jesus is not the Lord, that there may be other lords that people will worship and that that is OK when it is definitely not OK; and that there are some who have said and continue to say that He did not really die, that he could not possibly have arisen, and that his ascension is just the stuff of "primitive" belief, something that we have now grown out of.

3. The Nicene Creed not only announces that the Church will only remain Christian if it affirms that this

“... we do not say the Creed alone, but with believers past, present, and future ...”

Jesus Christ, our Lord, has made Himself known to us as Son of God, “very God of very

God”, incarnate as man, coming to judge, but it also warns us that there have been and still are those like Arius who deny the Son's divinity and are prepared not only to tear apart the fabric of our own Anglican Communion but who are also publicly willing to divide the one holy catholic and apostolic Church from its historic faith and to separate orthodox believers from one another.

4. The Creed not only affirms that the Holy Spirit is called, as Paul says, the Lord, who works through the one Church to bring life to the world; the Creed also warns us that there have been and still are those who would lead Christians into a faith that is made up only of private devotion, one in which 'I will only recognize faith in those who experience God in

the same way that I do'. And it warns us against the danger that we are all prone to, namely, to attempt to live our lives as Christians merely on the basis of human effort rather than in the power of the same life-giving Spirit who alone can 'bring new life to these bones'.

We need to be thankful to our forefathers, who forged this Creed in the heat of battle against false-belief. When "revisionists" suggest that we need new creeds that are more up-to-date, we need to be able to have an answer for them. By proposing that the Nicene Creed is just a vestige of a past day, they give us an incentive to make sure that we do not throw overboard the very compass that has helped the Church to stay on course since the creation of the Christian Church. By asking us to invent a new compass, one that is more in accord with the popular beliefs of our day and the social norms that post-Christian societies have come to adopt, these "revisionists" have in fact helped us to be clearer about what we do believe and why.

They will have to answer for their attempt to get us to sail by heeding the siren-songs of the world around us. But we will not let them take over the ship. For we know that it is by this ship, which is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, that we will go on in Christ to grow into a better knowledge of what makes us children of the Father, through the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son, and by the life-giving power of His Holy Spirit.

To this God, one God in three persons, be all praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.

1. Charles Harold Dodd, According to the Scriptures (originally presented as the 1950 Stone Lectures (Princeton Theological Seminary); New York: Scribner, 1953), 11.