

The Nicene Creed

What We Believe

2. “We Believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ”

John 14:8-14; 1 John 1:1-4

Pentecost 10

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A British gentleman purchased his first Rolls-Royce.

He could find nothing in the advertising material,
the operators manual, or on the automobile itself
that revealed the horsepower of the engine.

After making several inquiries he learned that
it was not the policy of the Rolls Royce corporation
to address the topic of their vehicles’ horsepower.

This man, nevertheless, was curious.

Having paid a rather substantial sum for
his luxury car, he thought he was entitled
to know what its horsepower was.

So he wrote the chairman of the board asking
him to provide this single piece of information.

In a few days a telegram was delivered to
his house with a single-word answer: **Adequate.**

Adequate. That’s how I would sum up the
Nicene Creed.

I think the Nicene Creed offers a powerful
and all-encompassing understanding which
is adequate for our Christian faith.

It communicates a basic statement of what
we believe about the Trinitarian deity
that we address as God-the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit.

And it concludes with a compelling vision of
the church, the purpose of baptism, and
our future destiny after death.

Last week I began this four-part sermon series
on the Nicene Creed with its first article
“We believe in one God, the Father,
the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.”

We read from Genesis's opening chapter
that proclaims God as the Creator,
and how this proclamation grounds all
the other statements of the Creed.

This morning I turn to the Nicene Creed's
second and longest article which is devoted to
the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

It falls into two natural sections,
the first describing Jesus' relationship with
God the Father, maker of heaven and earth,
and the second narrating his involvement
with humanity, from his incarnation
to his second coming.

The second article of the Nicene Creed originated
as a response to a group of believers
who followed a theologian names Arius,
who denied the divine nature of Jesus.

When the bishops met at the Council of
Nicaea in 325 AD and later in 381 at
Constantinople, they asserted that Jesus is
both at once fully divine and fully human.

Needless to say, for most Christians today,
this article is the least comprehensible part
of the creed.

Many of us who recite these words on Festival
occasions such as Christmas, Easter, and
Pentecost do not understand the opening
words of this article.

Those who question the value of having creeds
find their best ammunition in this section,
because it seems to focus on abstract
philosophy rather than the concrete
facts of salvation.

To appreciate this part of the creed,
it is helpful to understand the way
it developed as it did.

Historically speaking, the earliest Christians
first experienced Jesus in the flesh –
in his full humanity – and they began
to wonder and appreciate his divinity.

It was after his resurrection from the dead
they began to realize Jesus as more than
some special or even supernatural being.
They saw him as God's unique representative,
as God's presence in human form,
as God's only Son.

Notice that the creed does not ascribe divinity
to Jesus as the result of divine adoption
or intervention.

This belief is not the result of a long
development or evolution of thinking
over time, as though the first Christians
considered Jesus simply a man and
only much later did their more theological
successors attribute divinity to him.

From my own reading and study of
the entire New Testament written over a
span of 65 years and the second century
writings of the early church fathers,
it would seem that the earliest Christians
saw Jesus both in his humble humanity
as in his divine nature.

However, it is after his resurrection that
disciples like Thomas could address
and confess Jesus as "my Lord and my God."

It is with the outpouring of the Third Person
of the Holy Trinity at Pentecost – the
Holy Spirit – who enabled Jesus' followers
to begin to grasp who this Jesus was
and still is to them.

In the letters of Paul and the sermon
usually called the Letter to the Hebrews,
written some 20 to 25 years after the
death of Jesus and probably some 20 to
25 years before Mark's first Gospel,
we read that the resurrection of Jesus
is not only considered a historical event,
but also an on-going, personal, and
spiritual presence of Jesus among his followers
through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It was because they were “in the Spirit” that they could confess “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3), that is, sharing God’s life and sovereignty over all creation.

It was because they had all “drunk the one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12) that they were “in Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2) and indeed had been spiritually formed into the “body of Christ” – the church (1 Corinthians 12:27), the physical expression of the resurrection life of Jesus, the Messiah and Lord.

In Paul’s letters and in Hebrews, the exaltation of Jesus by resurrection and ascension is more than a vindication by God of a good human being who was unjustly accused and executed.

It is the return of Christ to a position that is properly his.

In his upbeat letter to the Philippians, Paul declares that the one who by resurrection is called Lord began “in the form of God” and emptied himself out, taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6-7).

In Colossians, Paul calls Jesus the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15) and the “likeness of God” in Second Corinthians (2 Cor. 4:4).

To the Galatians Paul wrote, God “sent forth his Son” to redeem humans (Galatians 4:4).

In Ephesians, Paul teaches, in him were “all things created” (Ephesians 1:16).

The letter to the Hebrews similarly says that God “created the world through him” (1:2), and speaks of the Son as one who “reflects the very glory of God and bears the shame of his very nature” (1:3).

The Gospel of John also tells its readers and hearers that a deeper understanding of Jesus by his followers came only after his death and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus himself says this: “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:25-26).

This deeper understanding of Jesus is precisely what John’s Gospel provides.

Take for example this passage.

After Jesus’ cleansing of the temple early on in chapter two, John writes this, “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (2:22).

The unapologetic confession of Jesus Christ as divine scandalizes many who call themselves Christian.

For fewer and fewer Christians the truly robust statements about Jesus as the “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father” is not the rule of faith for them.

Many today; consciously or not, subscribe to a modernized form of the Arian heresy.

Remember my mention of Arius earlier in this message?

There are those who share with their Arian forbearers who believe according to the bounds of reason, and like them use reason to reduce the mystery of Christ to his humanity alone.

The contemporary version of Arianism found its ideal expression in the so-called quest for the historical Jesus that began in the seventeenth century and found renewed vigor and notoriety in the recent Jesus Seminar.

These mostly academic “questers” sought “the real Jesus” based on what they thought history showed, rather than on the faith of the church and what “Nicaean Christians” believe.

For them, historical study dealt with verifiable events in time and space.

The historical equals the real.
If something is not historical, it is not real.
As historians, the academics of the Jesus Seminar
 must conclude divine causes such as miracles,
 because divine acts are not objects that
 historians can validate and study.
The “Real Jesus,” therefore, could only be a
 Jesus stripped of divinity.
But a Jesus stripped of divinity is just another human.

To be Christian in any significant sense of
 the term is to claim that God was fully
 present in the human Jesus in a manner
 and a fullness not realized in any other creature.
It is to claim the way of knowing called
 faith, with the willingness to imagine
 the promises of God uttered in Scripture,
 so that when we look at the human Jesus
 we see also God’s only Son and say with
 Paul, “For it is the God who said,
 ‘Let light shine out of darkness, who
 has shone in our hearts to give the light
 of the knowledge of the glory of God
 in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:6)

Beloved people of God,
 we are Christians in the first place,
 not because Jesus was a wise and splendid
 teacher of the morals of first century Palestinian
 Judaism or because he had a better vision
 than the Romans for the ordering of society.
We are Christians because somehow in Christ -
 through prayer and our suffering,
 through acts of love and kindness
 to each other and to our neighbors –
 we have, in Christ’s name been touched
 and transformed by God.
Remember, it was for us and for our salvation
 that Jesus became human. Amen.