“Their Lord and Ours”: The Enduring Legacy of Nicaea

Edited by Mark A. Garcia
with Peter A. Lillback and Thomas Schirrmacher

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The editors of this volume humbly dedicate this work
"To the church of God ..., to those sanctified in Christ Jesus,
called to be saints together with all those who in every place
call upon the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *both their Lord and ours*."
1 Corinthians 1:2-3 (ESV)

With gratitude to the Board, Administration, and Faculty
of Westminster Theological Seminary,
and at the kind invitation of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA),
this project has been conceived and is here presented
in commemoration of the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea
and unto the glory of God
Who the Church faithfully confesses in every age.

Foreword

Peter A. Lillback

I thank Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher and the World Evangelical Alliance for this opportunity for Westminster Theological Seminary to organize a written celebration of the Council of Nicaea at the 1700th anniversary of that great gathering. The Trinitarian legacy of that Council gathered in 325 has continued to be strongly defended and faithfully passed along.

As these essays are presented to the global Church through the work of the World Evangelical Alliance, Dr. Mark Garcia and I also wish to observe that this is not the first time that Westminster Theological Seminary has addressed the matter of creeds. In 1973, Dr. John Skilton organized an anthology of writings by some of his fellow Westminster faculty as well as other Westminster theologians who had preceded him. Their reflections provide insights into the nature of Nicaea and other creeds.[1]

The Poetry and Precision of Creeds

To begin, we might ask, "What is a creed?" A fascinating answer is given by Philip Schaff. He writes, "A creed is, as it were, a doctrinal poem written under the inspiration of divine truth. This may be said at least of the oecumenical creeds."[2]

But just as poetry is not static and advances with new productions in each passing generation, should there not also be progress in creeds? J. Gresham Machen, the founder of Westminster Seminary, answers in the affirmative. This is because there must be "greater precision and fullness of doctrinal statement." He explains, "Just run over in your minds again the history of the great creeds of the church. How meagre was the so-called Apostles' Creed, first formulated in the second century! How far more precise and full were the creeds of the great early councils beginning with the Nicene Creed in A.D. 325! How much more precise and how vastly richer still were the Reformation creeds and

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1 John H. Skilton, *Scripture and Confession: A Book About Confessions Old and New* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1973).

2 Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 1977), 1:7 n.2.

especially our Westminster Confession of Faith!"[3] "Precision" is a vital ingredient in the "poetry" of creeds.

But why stop at the Westminster Confession of Faith? Should not the progress with creeds continue? Machen asks, "Why should the progress be thought to have been brought to a close in the seventeenth century, when the Westminster confession of faith and catechisms were produced? Why should there not be still further doctrine and advance? The church advanced in doctrine up to the time of the Westminster standards, why should it now not proceed still further on its onward march?"[4]

He answers affirmatively, but with an important qualification: "Well, there's no essential reason why it should not do so. However, before it attempts to do so, it is very important for her to understand precisely what Christian doctrine is. The church should understand very clearly that Christian doctrine is just a setting forth of what the Bible teaches. At the foundation of Christian doctrine is the acceptance of the full truthfulness of the Bible as the Word of God:

> That is often forgotten by those who today undertake to write confessional statements. Let us give expression to our Christian experience, they say, in forms better suited to the times in which we are living than are the older creeds of the church. So they sit down and concoct various forms of words, which they represent as being on a plane with the great creeds of Christendom.[5]

Here, then, is his important caveat: progress should not be made merely for progress's sake. Machen avers, "This increasing precision and this increasing richness of doctrinal statement were arrived at particularly by way of refutation of errors as they successively arose."[6] But this, however, has not been the method of "recent years." Machen explains:

> ... the church has often entered upon an exactly opposite course of procedure. It has constructed what purport to be doctrinal statements, but these supposed doctrinal statements are constructed for a purpose which is just the opposite of the purpose that governed the formation of the great historic creeds .... These modern statements, on the contrary, are inclusive of

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3 J. Gresham Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 151.

4 Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 149-150.

5 Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 150.

6 Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 150.

> error. They are designed to make room in the church for just as many people and for just as many types of thought as possible.[7]

John Murray, a fellow founding Westminster Seminary professor with Machen, declared, "Unless we maintain that the tradition established in the church from the early fourth century until the seventeenth was a mistake, there can be no gainsaying of the demand that creedal confession must keep pace with the challenge of heresy. And not only so; there is much to support the suspicion, if not the indictment, that the incursions of error have often undermined the witness of the church because the church has failed to enunciate and guard its faith in creedal expression directed against those deviations that pervert the purity of the faith once delivered to the saints."[8]

As we shall see, the "poetry" of the great ecumenical creedal tradition of Nicaea was consciously born with a concern for doctrinal "precision." The first Creed from the Council of Nicaea in 325 concluded with strong words to address what Professor Murray called "deviations that pervert the purity of the faith once delivered to the saints." The first Creed developed at Nicaea concluded with these words of theological condemnation:

> But as for those who say, There was when He was not,
> and, Before being born He was not,
> and that He came into existence out of nothing,
> or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance,
> or created,
> or is subject to alteration or change
> —these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

The continuing legacy of Nicaea and its Creed after these long seventeen centuries is inextricably bound with an unflinching concern for Trinitarian orthodoxy.

The "Ecumenical Creeds"

The great creeds of our catholic tradition are the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. The decisive Christological definition of 451 produced by the Council of Chalcedon could be added to this trilogy, although it does not possess their liturgical prominence.

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7 Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 151-2.

8 John Murray, "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 126.

The Apostles' Creed is often thought of as "the Creed of creeds"[9] due to its early and broad use across many Christian traditions. It has often been regarded as that which unites the whole Christian Church and the fountain from which all other creeds have sprung.

The ancient church theologian, Augustine, said of the Creed, "The rule of faith is brief yet vast; brief in the number of words, vast in the weight of its statements." (*regula fidei brevis et grandis; brevis numero verborum, grandis pondere sententiarum*.)[10] Luther's Small Catechism called it "The Creed" and divided it into three articles—"Of Creation," "Of Redemption," "Of Sanctification"—and instructed that "The head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household." The Apostles' Creed is embedded in the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 22: "What is it, then, necessary for a Christian to believe?" "All that is promised us in the Gospel, which the articles of our catholic, undoubted Christian faith teach us in sum." Then, in Q&A 23, the Apostles' Creed is stated in full.

Calvin honored the Apostles' Creed by following its structure in the four books of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin writes:

> Thus far I have followed the order of the Apostles' Creed because it sums up in a few words the main points of our redemption, and thus may serve as a tablet for us upon which we see distinctly and point by point the things in Christ that we ought to heed. I call it the Apostles' Creed without concerning myself in the least as to its authorship. With considerable agreement, the old writers certainly attribute it to the apostles, holding it to have been written and published by the apostles in common or to be a summary of teaching transmitted by their hands and collected in good faith, and thus worthy of that title. I have no doubt that at the very beginning of the church, in the apostolic age, it was received as a public confession by the consent of all—wherever it originated.[11]

Along with the Apostles' Creed's broad recognition, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed have achieved vast acceptance, though to a lesser extent. For example, the eighth article in the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles states:

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9 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:7.

10 These words are a summation of two of his writings where he taught candidates for baptism on the Creed—*Sermo de Symbolo ad catechumenos* and *De Fide et Symbolo*. See Augustine in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889, 1.3.

11 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.16.18.

> The three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed, for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.

The eleventh article of Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession states:

> And, to speak many things in a few words, with a sincere heart we believe, and with liberty of speech we freely profess, whatsoever things are defined out of the Holy Scriptures, and comprehended in the creeds, and in the decrees of these four first and most excellent councils—held at Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon—together with blessed Athanasius's creed and all other creeds like to these, touching the mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ; and we condemn all things contrary to the same."

The fifth article of the Gallican Confession asserts:

> Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them. And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God."

The ninth article of the Belgic Confession affirms the consistency of the three Creeds with the Scriptures:

> The doctrine of the Holy Trinity hath always been defended and maintained by the true Church, since the times of the Apostles to this very day, against the Jews, Mohammedans, and some false Christians and heretics, as Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles, of Nice, and of Athanasius; likewise that which conformable thereunto, is agreed upon by the ancient fathers."

Interestingly, the Westminster Assembly did not include the names of these three ecumenical creeds nor their exact language in their theological standards. Instead, they established the truths of the creeds from Scripture and then printed the ancient creeds along with and following the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Still, while recognized as ecumenical Christian creeds, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed have not enjoyed as broad a liturgical use as the Apostles' Creed has.

Protestants and Roman Catholics on the Authority of Creeds

The Nicene Creed has been clearly recognized as an essential catholic creed of both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. But the Nicene Creed faced several historical and theological challenges in its history. First, as a potential surprise to many, the Nicene Creed as we know it was not the creed produced by the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Nicene Creed, to reach what is conventionally regarded as its final form, went through a substantial period of acceptance, rejection, and perfection, including the ultimate removal of its condemnatory language.

The motives for accepting the Nicene Creed are different between Roman Catholics and Protestants as well. For the Roman Catholic tradition, adherence to the Nicene Creed was the continuation of what was believed to be the direct tradition of their theological forebears, reaching back to the apostles. For Protestants, affirmation of the Nicene Creed was grounded in their belief that the Creed was an excellent theological summation of the truths revealed in the Bible.

In his historical introduction to the Nicene Creed, Henry Percival explained what he believed to be the essence of Roman Catholic Church tradition:

> The history of the council of Nicaea has been so often written by so many brilliant historians, from the time of its sitting down to today, that any historical notice of the causes leading to its assembling, or account of its proceedings, seems quite unnecessary. The Editor, however, ventures to call the attention of the reader to the fact that in this, as in every other of the seven ecumenical councils, the question the Fathers considered was not what they supposed Holy Scripture might mean, or what they, from *a priori* arguments, thought would be consistent with the mind of God, but something entirely different, to wit, what they had received. They understood their position to be that of witnesses, not that of exegetes. They recognized but one duty resting upon them in this respect—to hand down to other faithful men that good thing the church had received according to the command of God. The first requirement was not learning, but honesty. The question they were called upon to answer was not, what do I think probable, or even certain, from Holy Scripture? but, what have I been taught, what has been intrusted to me to hand down to others? When the time came, in the Fourth Council, to examine the Tome of Pope Saint Leo, the question was not whether it could be proved to the satisfaction of the assembled fathers from Holy Scripture, but whether it was the traditional faith of the church. It was not the doctrine of Leo in the fifth century, but the doctrine of Peter in the first, and of the

> church since then, that they desired to believe and to teach, and so, when they studied the Tome, they cried out: "This is the faith of the Fathers! This is the faith of the Apostles! ... Peter hath thus spoken by Leo! The apostles thus taught! Cyril thus taught! etc."[12]

But this celebration of alleged unbroken tradition is far different from the position of historic Protestant theology. In the Protestant mind, the ultimate authority for the Church must be the Scriptures, not tradition. This understanding of the Scriptures allows for the Church to state biblical truth through her creeds. Schaff observes:

> In the Protestant system, the authority of symbols, as of all human compositions, is relative and limited. It is not co-ordinate with, but always subordinate to, the Bible, as the only infallible rule of Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. At best a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the Church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible. The Bible is of God: the Confession is man's answer to God's word."[13]

Tradition, then, is a decisive matter for Rome's commitment to the early creeds, while for the Reformed tradition the creeds were maintained because of their accord with scriptural truth. Yet, despite the great differences between Protestant and Catholic, as Machen observed in his epoch-making *Christianity and Liberalism*, Protestants and Catholics have more in common than historic Protestants have with liberal Protestants:

> ... serious still is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.[14]

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12 Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 2.

13 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:7.

14 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1923), 52.

For all our differences, Protestants and Catholics are united in the "catholic" creeds emanating from the apostolic witness contained in Scripture.

The Arian Crisis: From the Creed of Nicaea to the Nicene Creed

Why was the Apostles' Creed not enough for the Church? The reason was the crisis created by the non-Trinitarian theology of Arius and his followers. Especially after the Council, his views were confronted by the heroic Athanasius. It was due to Arius's theological errors that the Council of Nicaea was held and the great Trinitarian Creed was ultimately produced. There is a direct history from the Apostles' Creed to the first creed as developed by the Council of Nicaea. But this creed was not yet what we conventionally call "the Nicene Creed." There were to be various versions that intervened and attempted to perfect Nicaea, as theologians wrestled with the first attempts to express Trinitarian theology. There was a dynamic period of attempting to define the elements of the creed.

This process finally reached an official form at the Council of Constantinople in 381. But even beyond that, in the West, the Nicene Creed was further amended due in part to the general use in the church of the added *filioque* clause ("and from the Son") regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father. This clause has been rejected by the Eastern church, not only on theological grounds, but also because no ecumenical council of both East and West was ever held to secure the Eastern church's approval.

We find the essence of Arius' heretical doctrine of God in his letter to Alexander of Alexandria dating from 320, as found in Athanasius' writings. Speaking of Christ, Arius writes:

> Our faith from our forefathers, ... He made Him subsist at His own will, unalterable and unchangeable; perfect creature of God, ... but the Son being begotten apart from time by the Father, and being created and founded before ages, was not before His generation, but being begotten apart from time before all things, alone was made to subsist by the Father. For He is not eternal or co-eternal or co-unoriginate with the Father, ... God is before all things as being Monad and Beginning of all. Wherefore also He is before the Son; ... So far then as from God He has being, and glories, and life, and all things are delivered unto Him, in such sense is God His origin. For He is above Him, as being His God, and before Him."[15]

[15] Athanasius, *De Synodis* 16; *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (NPNF), 2/4:458.

And so, the Council of Nicaea in 325 sought to make a good confession about Jesus Christ. In its statement, it provided the essential form of what would become our ecumenical creed, the Nicene Creed. However, note how it concludes with a potent anathema of the Arian perspective:

> ... But as for those who say, There was when He was not,
> and, Before being born He was not,
> and that He came into existence out of nothing,
> or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance,
> or created,
> or is subject to alteration or change
> —these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

But this initial form did not last, for in 360, at a Council in Constantinople, the bishops who gathered determined to prohibit the Trinitarian language of the council of Nicaea held 35 years before. The text in various ways was modeled on Nicaea, but it prohibited the use of the word "essence":

> We believe in One God, Father Almighty, from whom are all things; And in the Only-begotten Son of God, begotten from God before all ages and before every beginning, by whom all things were made, visible and invisible, and begotten as only-begotten, only from the Father only, God from God, like to the Father that begat Him according to the Scriptures; whose origin no one knows, except the Father alone who begat Him. He as we acknowledge, the Only-begotten Son of God, the Father sending Him, *... But the name of 'Essence,' which was set down by the Fathers in simplicity, and, being unknown by the people, caused offence, because the Scriptures contain it not, it has seemed good to abolish, and for the future to make no mention of it at all; since the divine Scriptures have made no mention of the Essence of Father and Son. For neither ought Subsistence to be named concerning Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But, we say that the Son is Like the Father, as the divine Scriptures say and teach; and all the heresies, both those which have been afore condemned already, and whatever are of modern date, being contrary to this published statement, be they anathema.*[16]

It was not until after further debate and reflection over another twenty years that the Council of Constantinople held in 381 was able to finalize and clarify what has ever since been understood to be catholic Trinitarian orthodoxy. The Council of Constantinople held in 381 produced the official version of the Nicene Creed that we know today. In doing so, it settled the orthodox use of many classic Trinitarian theological terms in its synodical letter of 382. The letter not only clarifies the one substance of the Godhead,

[16] Emphasis the author's.

but further clarifies that there are three distinct persons or hypostases in the one true God. In giving this statement, it also identifies various heretical groups. The Church leaders declare, "Let this suffice for a summary of the doctrine which is fearlessly and frankly preached by us ..."

The definitive portion of the letter states:

> ... we wish to make it plain that our disposition is all for peace with unity for its sole object, and that we are full of zeal for the right faith. For we, whether we suffered persecutions, or afflictions, or the threats of emperors, or the cruelties of princes, or any other trial at the hands of heretics, have undergone all for the sake of the evangelic faith, ratified by the three hundred and eighteen fathers at Nicaea in Bithynia. This is the faith which ought to be sufficient for you, for us, for all who wrest not the faith that teaches us to believe in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. According to this faith there is one Godhead, Power and Substance of the Father equal in three perfect hypostases, i.e. three perfect persons. Thus there is no room for the heresy of Sabellius by the confusion of the hypostases, i.e. the destruction of the personalities; thus the blasphemy of the Eunomians, of the Arians, and of the Pneumatomachi is nullified, which divides the substance, the nature, and the godhead, and superinduces on the uncreated consubstantial and co-eternal Trinity a nature posterior, created and of a different substance. We moreover preserve unperverted the doctrine of the incarnation of the Lord, holding the tradition that the dispensation of the flesh is neither soulless nor mindless nor imperfect; and knowing full well that God 's Word was perfect before the ages, and became perfect man in the last days for our salvation.[17]

The final version of the Creed after this long struggle is what we call the Nicene Creed. It is this final version that is held confessionally by churches today.

Calvin and the Nicene Creed

Remembering Schaff's statement that creeds are the poetry of theology, it is fascinating to discover that the youthful Calvin entered into a critique of Nicaea's language of "God of God, very God of very God, begotten not made." He entered into an ill-advised debate with a theologian named Pierre Caroli.[18] In the process of debating his Trinitarian views, he asserted that the Nicene Creed was not really designed to be a good confession but seemed more appropriate for use in a liturgy.

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17 The Council of Constantinople, *The Synodical Letter* (NPNF 2/14:388).

18 On Calvin and the Nicene Creed, see Todd Rester's essay in this volume.

Calvin, of course, wanted to maintain the principle of Scripture over human creed—even over the great ecumenical creeds. The evidence of his life and his *Institutes* reveal he was a thorough-going Trinitarian. However, in the process of debating with Caroli, he wrote, "you see it to be a poem, more suited to chanting than a formula of confession" (*carmen cantillando magis aptum*, *quam confessionis formula*). Here we can recognize that in Calvin's mind the Creed was liturgical poetry and theology blended together.[19]

Calvin's historic context in his debate with Caroli regarding the theology of the Nicene Creed has been well addressed by various scholars.[20]

Creeds and Confessions: Orthodox Freedom versus Theological Liberalism

For Protestants, then, confession and Scripture must be distinct. The latter is infallible and divinely authoritative while the former is derivative and hence only indirectly authoritative.

But this understanding provides freedom for the Church in its witness. The act of confession emerges from the Church's freedom to use non-biblical words to summarize and assert biblical truth. To say something with only scriptural words would not be a confession.

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[19] Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum et al. (1871), Vol. 7, 315-16. There has been a vigorous debate as to what exactly Calvin was seeking to say about the Nicene Creed in this context. In his work against Caroli, he makes the remarkable statement, "What if I deny that this formula you thrust upon me originated from the Council of Nicaea? For it is not credible that the holy fathers, wishing to embrace a formula composed of the most necessary things with the greatest possible brevity, would have desired a superfluous circuitousness of words. But you see in these words a jumble: God from God, light from light, true God from true God. What is the purpose of this repetition? Does it have any emphasis or greater expression? Therefore you see it to be a poem, more suited to chanting than a formula of confession, in which it is absurd for one syllable to be redundant. What of Augustine, who was a very faithful adherent of the Council of Nicaea, but vigorously attacked that particle: 'I believe in the holy church'? For he contended that this was a flawed expression. Would he have done this at least without a preface of honor if he thought it flowed from such authors? Indeed, he even charges those who speak thus with ignorance. Yet you wish to compel all believers to assent to you even in this error."

[20] See François Wendel. *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought*, translated by Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 52-57, 125-26; B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1954), 206ff.

If a creed is the poetry of theology emerging from Scriptural precision, it is still more. A creed as a confession of one's faith is also an act of obedience to the pattern of biblical revelation. A creed as a confession reflects a practice observed in the Scriptures themselves. It is not only that confessions speak about Scripture, as in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter one. As Norman Shepherd observes, Scripture also teaches us about confession, encouraging us to confess.[21] The fact is, we find Christ's confession and human confession placed side-by-side in the writings of Paul. In I Timothy 6:13 we read of Jesus' "good confession" before Pontius Pilate. But this reference to Christ follows the Apostle Paul's comment in the preceding verse, I Timothy 6:12. There Paul speaks of Timothy's "good confession before many witnesses."[22] Jesus confessed His faith, and following Christ's example, so did Timothy.

Following this scriptural pattern, the creed is a critical part of historic Reformed worship. The great mysteries of the Trinity are through them rehearsed and communicated to the congregation. In *Christianity and Liberalism,* Machen rejected the claim that the creeds were merely dead orthodoxy:

> After listening to modern tirades against the great creeds of the church, one receives rather a shock when one turns to the Westminster Confession, for example, or to that tenderest and most theological of books, the *Pilgrim's Progress* of John Bunyan, and discovers that in doing so one has turned from shallow modern phrases to a "dead orthodoxy" that is pulsating with life in every word. In such orthodoxy there is life enough to set the whole world aglow with Christian love.[23]

Paradoxically, for Machen, while the historic creeds can deeply stir our hearts; nevertheless they do not take their root from Christian experience. He writes:

> The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word. Far from the subject-matter of the creeds being derived from Christian experience, it

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21 "Scripture and Confession," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton and Norman Shepherd (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 1-30. See also John H. Skilton, "Confessions of Faith at Caesarea Philippi," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 67-94.

22 Shepherd, "Scripture and Confession," 13-14.

23 Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 46.

> is Christian experience which is based upon the truth contained in the creeds; and the truth contained in the creeds is derived from the Bible.[24]

Machen's insistence on the Bible as the true source of our creeds is evident in "The Progress of Christian Doctrine," where he offers a thought experiment of what would happen if all the creeds of Christendom were suddenly wiped out from human memory. He asserts that if the Bible remained, the creeds could be rebuilt, perhaps after many centuries. His point is that the Bible is what is necessary for the Church. He declares, "How terrible, however, the loss would in that case be! How terrible it would be if we had to start all over again in our study of the Bible without help from the great creeds, without help from Augustine, without help from the great theologians of the Reformation!"[25]

When contemporary Christians write confessions today to express their Christian experience, Machen believed:

> ... they are simply forgetting what the creeds of Christendom are. The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. There are summary statements of what God has told us in his Word. Far from the subject matter of the creed being derived from Christian experience, it is Christian experience, which is based upon the truth contained in the creeds; and the truth contained in the creed is derived from the Bible, which is the word of God. ... Far from continuing advance of Christian doctrine, they are starting something entirely different, that something different, we may add, is doomed to failure from the start.[26]

When doctrine is replaced by experience, Machen argued, the "modernism" that results is a constantly changing orthodoxy that contradicts itself from one generation to the next:

> One generation expresses its Christian experience and one doctrine, and then another generation expresses the same Christian experience in exactly opposite doctrine. So the modernism of today becomes the orthodoxy of tomorrow, which in turn gets replaced by a new modernism, and so on in an infinite series. No doctrine, according to that theory, can remain valid forever; doctrine must change as the forms of thought change from age to age.[27]

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[24] John Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 158.

[25] Machen, "The Progress of Christian Doctrine," *Presbyterian Guardian* 7:1 (January 10, 1940), 8.

[26] Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 150.

[27] Machen, "The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," 154.

It was just such a situation that Edmund Clowney, Westminster Seminary's first president, critiqued as he wrote of the Presbyterian Church's new Confession. In Clowney's assessment, the Liberals' rewriting of the Westminster Confession allowed far greater freedom for the Church, but in this case, freedom from Scripture. Clowney asserted:

> With the confessional revision, the [ordination] question was rewritten: 'Will you perform the duties of a minister of the gospel in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of the Scriptures, and under the continuing instruction and guidance of the confessions of this church?' No longer need any minister believe in any structure of doctrine whatever. He is not asked 'to receive and adopt' any. Indeed, an earlier form of 'accepts and is guided by the Nicene and Apostles' Creed...' was changed in the form of ordination by the deletion of 'accepts.'
>
> The removal of creedal subscription from the form of ordination means, of course, that the United Presbyterian Church is in no meaningful sense a confessional church holding to Reformed doctrine. It would be difficult to demonstrate that the new subscription questions could eliminate anyone, given the elasticity of promising to be guided by the Confession of 1967, and given the possible reinterpretations of the meaning of 'Jesus Christ', when the Bible is made only a human witness to the Christ-event.[28]

For historic Westminster Seminary, the freedom to make creeds and confessions in human words must be based on Scripture in order to advance scriptural truth, not to free the church from God's written Word. The freedom sought by modernist creed-makers is to be liberated from the Bible to celebrate their own religious experience. The Nicene Creed stands as a theological bulwark and seminal model for Westminster's perspective on the nature and purpose of creedal and confessional statements.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this new contribution to the global celebration and study of the Council of Nicaea and its witness will encourage the worldwide Church once again to be bold to confess the ancient biblical truth of our Triune God Who is Lord of all. As Cornelius Van Til declared:

> Looking at the present situation might well bring the believer in the Christ of Scripture to despair. But then he takes a fresh look at Christ witnessing

[28] Edmund P. Clowney, "The Broken Bands: Constitutional Revolution in American Presbyterianism," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 215-16.

> the good confession before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. He, with Luther, takes a fresh look at Christ's little ones. Then the love of Christ constrains him to follow the example of Peter before the Sanhedrin, of Paul at Athens, and of Luther at Worms. God so loved the world that he sent his Son to redeem it. The Son redeemed the world. All power is given unto him. He will be the victor. In the name of his Lord the believer will plead with all men, including those who profess but compromise his name, to repent and believe to the saving of their soul and to the praise of their Saviour.[29]

Our prayer is that by re-engaging the work of the Council of Nicaea and its bold witness to the divine and risen Christ, that "the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and giver of life" will bring new spiritual life to you. May He through us together advance the kingdom and message of our Lord Jesus Christ. For He is indeed our "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God … who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven."

Peter A. Lillback
Glenside, PA, USA
August 31, 2025

[29] Cornelius Van Til, "Confessing Jesus Christ," in *Scripture and Confession: A Book about Confessions Old and New*, ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 245-46.

Preface

Mark A. Garcia

It is a regrettable feature of modern evangelical church life that the Christian tradition, including even its catholic creeds, is often seen to be in rivalrous tension with a controlling and fruitful commitment to the primacy of Holy Scripture. While this situation has improved in certain corners of the Church, particularly in places where the considerable advances in scholarship regarding the Reformation and the confessional eras have had salutary effects, the conditions on the ground in many Protestant Church contexts remain far from healthy. Perhaps this is nowhere more conspicuous than in the Church's liturgical life.

In contrast to this suspicion, the Reformed churches speak, yes, of Scripture as *norma normans*, that is, the sole *norming* norm or *ruling* rule in the faith and life of the Church, but we also speak of the catholic-creedal expressions of the Tradition as *norma normata*, the *normed* norm or *ruled* rule. Normed by Scripture, yes, but *still a norm*. Some, in their understandable zeal to protect the primacy of Scripture, confuse any high and functional place for the Christian tradition and the Church's creeds with Roman Catholicism. This is a sensibility none of the Reformers or their confession-creating progeny would recognize; indeed, some of them rather viscerally recoiled from similar suggestions in their own time. This point remains important to raise. Many of the heterodoxies of the modern era, some of which survive into our own day, may be appreciated as the result of either the biblicism which rejects the ecclesial context of the Spirit's sanctifying work through Word and sacrament in history, or of the traditionalism which, in some cases quite naively, reduces the Church's Faith to agreement with selectively isolated authorities. The present volume is provided in the prayer and hope that, by putting the more authentic Reformed and Protestant commitment somewhat on display, it may encourage better speech, thought, and practice in the Church at large. To this end, several of the essays in this collection seek to illustrate (rather than extensively argue) that biblicism is ironically unbiblical, that traditionalism is not the place of safety it promises to be, and that the way of Scripture in its properly configured relationship with the Church's confessed Faith is both liberating and necessary.

I hasten to clarify for the reader that this book is not designed to serve as an introduction to, analysis of, or exposition of the Council of Nicaea or

the Nicene Creed. Such books are certainly needed. Like other major events and figures in the history of the Church, including Protestantism, Nicaea has both benefited and suffered from its popularity. Sadly, it has long been necessary for teachers and preachers to offer students and parishioners gentle but clear distinctions between myth and history, the historical and theological equivalent of urban legends having shaped an alarming amount of what has been said for many years in general and even academic contexts. This applies to the nature of the Council itself, the scope and afterlife of its theological accomplishment, the role of figures like Athanasius, and the Church's reception of what would later be called "the Nicene Creed." In recent decades, scholars have done us all a great service in correcting these errors and providing a far more responsible account—at least historically if not always theologically. We enjoy an embarrassment of riches in our time in this department. For those interested, readers are especially encouraged to examine (among many worthy studies) the recent works of Wolfram Kinzig, including the four-volume project *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-related Texts* and *A History of Early Christian Creeds*.[1]

Instead of a commentary or historical analysis, while the essays that follow include such material, this volume is designed to illustrate ways in which the Creed's fundamental affirmations continue to provoke fruitful theological and practical reflection in and for the Church, not instead of but as a result of a humble posture of reception before the Spirit speaking through the Holy Scriptures generation after generation. This vision accounts for the apparent (and thus readily acknowledged!) unevenness of this collection: some essays are longer than others, some read more academically, some more contemplatively, but all represent ways the Creed's articulation of fundamental Christian truths remains a lively source of our faithful engagement and deployment of what God says to the Church in his Word. It is my hope and prayer that readers will not only leave each essay having been happily surprised at how the Creed's claims provoke this or that important truth, but will be inspired to think of yet further implications of its claims. Most of all, the reader should appreciate the vitality of the Rule of Faith (of which the Creed is a uniquely important example) that both Scripture and the Church commend to us as a hermeneutical, theological, and pastoral framework for interpreting God's Word, ourselves, the Church, and the world.

I offer the following brief notes on the contents of this volume to help the reader gauge expectations. The title of this volume repeats the Apostle

[1] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 and Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024, respectively.

Paul's catholic commitments as expressed in his opening words to the Corinthians, referring as he does to the Church as both the called *of* God who call *to* God, the same God for the one Church, "both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2-3). Peter Lillback's Foreword commends the act of confessing the Faith as a distinguishing mark of the obedient Church, and notes ways this has informed the Reformed tradition as a whole and has a special place in the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary. The English text of the Nicene Creed as confessed and known by the Church in our day is printed next, reprinted by kind permission of Westminster Seminary Press from *Reformed Standards of Unity*.[2]

Part One opens with a discussion of church councils written by the German Reformed Orthodox luminary, Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf (1561-1610). This text was first published in English translation by Greystone Theological Institute. Greystone has generously permitted its republication in print form here. The first of our author essays explores the complex yet critically important relationship of Scripture, the Church, and creedal affirmation, and argues that the New Testament confessions of Lord Jesus Christ bear witness to the Spirit's exertion of creedal "pressure" on the Church's reading—by the same Spirit—of the Scriptures of Israel alongside and in connection with the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

The next three essays illuminate the place of the Nicene Creed in history. Alex Tabaka provides an overview of the true story of the Council and of Athanasius's role in the Nicene tradition. Todd Rester then unpacks the complicated and important story of how the Reformed churches have related themselves to "the creeds" (which were ordinarily treated as a collective) and to the Nicene Creed in particular. Thomas Schirrmacher examines critical aspects of the Council, proposing an analysis of the role it played in the final distancing from Judaism and from the Jewish-Christian community that still existed at the time, especially in the context of the separation of the date of Easter from the Jewish Passover date and the establishment of Sunday as the only possible day for worship–all areas meriting much further research.

The opening essay on the Creed's contents (Part Two) suggests that the combination of "the Father Almighty" with "Maker of Heaven and Earth" both clarifies what kind of Father God is (and is not) as well as provides pastoral-theological resources for our context of broken trust and confusion on the dignity (or lack thereof) of our creatureliness. Robert Letham

[2] *Reformed Standards of Unity: The Historic Statements of Faith Confessed by the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches*, ed. by Peter A. Lillback and Bernard Aubert (Westminster Seminary Press, 2023).

then unfolds the Creed's confession of Lord Jesus Christ by expounding the historical-theological dynamics at work in confessing his Person. Brandon Crowe follows with an exegetically-oriented yet theologically sensitive treatment of the work of Jesus Christ as God for us. There follows an essay proposing a solution to the curious absence, in the Creed, of material related to the life of Christ, together with suggestions for why this phenomenon indirectly confirms the importance of key Reformed Christological, eucharistic, and ecclesial convictions. The next essay, on the Holy Spirit, picks up the argument from the earlier essay on "confessing between the lines" to further propose that the place of the Spirit in the eternal life of God as Trinity sets us up to expect what in fact we find in the Spirit's economic life, namely, that his divine eloquence is the voice at work in the Church's confession. The Spirit's work in the Church's confessional life both affirms the identity of the risen One and graciously folds the Church into sacred trinitarian doxology. Harrison Perkins then asks what difference it makes for the Church to be understood as the reality the Creed speaks of as one, holy, catholic, apostolic, baptized, and forgiven. William Edgar's essay is not about the resurrection of Christ itself, but rather tells the story of the rise of modern liberalism as a narrative of negotiating the claims of Scripture regarding history, including the historicity of the resurrection in particular. In a final, parting essay, Jeremiah Montgomery summons the Church to appreciate the enduring legacy and vitality of the Creed for contemporary Church faith and life.

As with all edited volumes, the essays reflect the contexts, perspectives, and priorities of their authors. Occasionally, they differ on minor matters or express unconventional opinions, and no attempt has been made by the editors to create an artificial uniformity on these questions. On the central or principal matters, there is happily a vibrant, energetic, and lucid harmony.

The present volume is the result of a conversation I had with Dr. Peter A. Lillback and Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, in which we shared a concern that the best of the Nicene tradition be carried forward under the authority of Holy Scripture for the good of the Church wherever she is found. I wish to thank Dr. Schirrmacher for his encouragement of the project, Dr. Lillback for his editorial and advisory support, the World Evangelical Alliance, Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft (VKW) and Mr. Titus Vogt for his instrumental role in bringing this book to print, Westminster Theological Seminary, Greystone Theological Institute, Mr. Handa Chun who provided timely and careful assistance to advance this collection to publication, Ms. Jessica Doerfel of Greystone Theological Institute for editorial support and for the selection of the cover image, Miss Adriana Garcia (soon to be

Adriana Kim) who generously devoted many hours to copy editing for this project, and of course the contributors of these fine essays, all of whom I am also honored to call my friends.

It is the prayer of all those involved in this project that the living God Who has revealed himself in his wondrous Word and works will remain the God confessed faithfully by his Church in every time and place. He is, and always will be, "both their Lord and ours." We humbly offer this project as an offering to his praise.

Mark A. Garcia
West Norriton, PA, USA
28 November 2025

The Nicene Creed*

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made;

who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

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* Reprinted, with permission, from *Reformed Standards of Unity: The Historic Statements of Faith Confessed by the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter A. Lillback and Bernard Aubert (Westminster Seminary Press, 2023). For an online database of biblical passages referred to or listed in this collection of Statements, see https://standards.wts.edu/. Note that, like the Scriptural texts listed in early modern marginalia, these biblical references ordinarily do not function exactly as "proof texts" do in the modern era, but instead serve, yes, as key texts for the doctrinal point being expressed, but also, and arguably primarily, as pointers to the fuller discussions or demonstrations of doctrine found in the traditional biblical commentaries and similar works. For a discussion of the nature and importance of this phenomenon in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, see Elsie Anne McKee, "Exegesis, Theology and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 154-72; Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union With Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 269-71; and Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 107-108.

PART ONE: HOLY SCRIPTURE, HOLY FAITH

1. Amandus Polanus on Councils[1]

Preface

Robert Letham published "Amandus Polanus: A Neglected Theologian" in 1990.[2] Since that time, Polanus has remained a neglected voice in theological *ressourcement* for the Church. But this tide is finally beginning to turn in scholarship.[3] Polanus was a significant theologian in early Reformed Orthodoxy and stands in a vital location–socially, theologically, and ecclesiastically—to bring much needed aid and comfort to the Church today. This is a fitting time for Polanus' voice to gain a wider audience. Why Polanus?

Polanus stands between the earliest periods of Reformed Orthodoxy and the events that brought about its most significant confessions. As a key synthesizer of the tradition, he demonstrates the whole, the parts, and the possibilities. He was a Professor of Old Testament at Basel in 1596. His productive years (1590-1610) places him on the scene to carry out the work of the previous generation (e.g. Beza, Zanchi) in the midst of the tumultuous events that eventually conclude with the Synod of Dort.

The value of his theological contributions for more recent modern controversies is readily apparent, but it is his comprehensive vision that most deserves the attention of the Reformed churches today. His project (and, it would appear, his mind and heart) was vast. Such theological knowledge and well-ordered curiosity, while not pretending at a knowledge fully grasped, is a vibrant but neglected virtue that may be put to work for wisdom, truth, and godliness in the Church.

The present work is a small one. *Certain Chapters on Councils* (*De conciliis capita quaedam*), published in 1592, is a series of theses and arguments about the nature, function, and purpose of Church councils for settling disputes. In roughly 3,000 words, Polanus describes what a council is, by whom it should be summoned, whether there is a place for the Pope

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1 The following is a translation of *On Councils* by Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf. Translated by Jonathan Tomes and Mark A. Garcia, this text is part of the *Greystone Texts & Studies Series* edited by Mark A. Garcia, Todd Rester, and Charles G. Kim.

2 Robert Letham, "Amandus Polanus: A Neglected Theologian?", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 463-476.

3 Stephen Tipton, *The Ground, Method, and Goal of Amandus Polanus, 1561-1610: Doctrine of God: A Historical and Contextual Analysis* (Reformed Historical Theology, 73; V&R), 2022.

convening a council, who should be invited, where it should be located, rules for order and argument, conciliar goals, the presence of Christ in the council, how to avoid prejudice, whether the presiders alone are the council judges, the duty of presiders, three kinds of councils, whether councils err, and ends with statements from the Fathers on the relation of councils to Scripture. His statements about councils are representative of the period, arranged logically in a way that contributes to retention by the reader, and present a worthy challenge for those who take a different view.

The following translation retains the capitalization, formatting, and abbreviation conventions found in the original.

On Councils

Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf

Preface

To the REVEREND and HONORABLE GENTLEMEN, Mr. David Zuinger, M. Basilio Lucio, Mr. Johann Lindio, faithful Pastors of the Mulhufen Church, Mr. Jacob Martin, Deacon, and Josiah Jeger, brothers and friends.

The name of councils are esteemed, their faith unique, and their authority weighty, so the Papists boast no less insolently in this place. For whatever the Scripture preaches about the Church, they immediately transfer it to Councils, as if the Councils were their own, by representing the Church with their opinion. We do not try to diminish the dignity of Councils, but we follow them in many and great judgment. Even the Papists do not follow them all. For the Council of Carthage, celebrated in the year 421 AD, which Augustine attended, and which was approved by the sixth general council of Constantinople, known as the Trullan, and confirmed by Pope Leo IV himself in *Decretals* part. 1, distinct. 20, chapter 1, De libellis, the Papists clearly disapprove of this council, greatly and disdainfully. Why? Because some of their rules for ecclesiastical households are not upheld. For canon 12 states: It has been decided that the sons or daughters of bishops or any other clergymen should not marry Gentiles, heretics, or schismatics. Canon 26 strictly forbids that the bishop of the first see should be called the highest priest, or prince of priests, or anything of the kind. It was also decreed that the bishop should have a small lodging near the church, and that he should have humble furnishings, a table, and sacrifices

for the poor, and that he should gain authority through his faith and integrity of life; and that he should use the things of the church as if they were entrusted to him, not as if they were his own. Why do not the Papists accept these decrees? Thus, they cannot bind us with the authority with which they do not want to be bound. However, since the order of theological disputations led me to councils, I wanted to dedicate some chapters on them to you, the Reverend and most illustrious gentlemen, MR. JOHANN JACOB Grynaeus, Dean of the Theological College at this time, as the author, as a testimony of my connection with you, and as evidence of our agreement in the truth of CHRIST, to whom I commend you and your church. Written in Basel, November 23, in the year of the Christian era 1592.

On Councils
Some Chapters

CHAPTER I. What is a Council?

A council is a legitimate and free gathering of learned and pious men, where in a peaceful, thorough, and God-fearing manner, opinions are discussed and reasons examined, to determine what Sacred Scripture pronounces on church controversies, and a common consensus is presented to the churches.

This is also said in the same sense.

II. By whom should it be summoned?

It should be summoned either by the authority of the ordinary magistrates or by the mutual exhortations of pious doctors and the consent of the churches if the magistrates do not handle ecclesiastical matters.

The arguments that show that the authority to summon a council lies with the ordinary magistrates are as follows:

1. Because the most proven examples attest to this. For example, Moses, Joshua, Judges or Governors, David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, etc. convoked synods with their own authority in the people of God. Furthermore, councils were also summoned by the authority of the Roman emperors, both general and particular councils, such as the NICENE COUNCIL summoned by CONSTANTINE THE GREAT against Arius, around the year 325 AD.

CONSTANTINOPLE by THEODOSIUS THE GREAT, against the Macedonians in the year 381. EPHESUS by Theodosius II, against Nestorius, in the year 431. CHALCEDON by Emperor Marcian, against Eutyches, in the year 451. CONSTANTINOPLE (which is also called the fifth) by emperor JUSTINIAN THE GREAT (who arranged the civil law) against Anathemius, Theodorus, Severus, Peter of Antioch, Zuraeus, who argued that Mary only gave birth to a man: in the year of Christ 541. By the command of CONSTANTINE THE GREAT, the Council was celebrated in ROME, under Sylvester I, in which the doctrine of Arius, Photinus, Sabellius, and Calixtus was condemned. By his command, the synod of CAESAREA and TYRE was celebrated, on account of Athanasius. CHARLES THE GREAT summoned several councils, such as MAINZ, WORMS, REMENSE, and TOURS, against abuses of the Church, FRANKFURT FURTENSE to Moenum against images, and CAVAILLON against religious pilgrimages. FREDERICK I of HERBIPOLI: OTHO and HENRY frequently assembled synods at MAINZ, WORMS and FRANKFURT.

The right of convening councils in the Church was in the hands of the Emperor. Cardinal Zabarella, the first interpreter of Canon law, did not hesitate to affirm this. Marsilius of PADUA confirms this in his book, entitled *The Defender of the Peace*. Cardinal Jacobatius also agrees in his treatise *On the Council*, book 3, art. I, col. 10, 11, 37.

2. Because God has commanded magistrates to take care that those under their rule are rightly taught about religion; and if any controversy arises about it, to decide it by the Word of God, as handed down in the writings of the Prophets and Apostles.
3. Because even the subjects, among whom are also the pastors of the Churches, cannot, without or against the will of the Magistrates, call whom they want from one region to another for public gatherings.
4. Because a Synod cannot serve to heal the concord of the Churches if the agreement and will of the Magistrates to uphold the decrees is not present.

THESE ARE THE REGULAR AUTHORITY OF MAGISTRATES in convening a council.

A council can also be legitimately gathered by the mutual encouragement of pious scholars and the agreement of their churches if the magistrates do not take care of ecclesiastical matters.

Thus, the councils of the Apostles and the first churches were gathered, such as at Antioch against Samosata, under Galienus and Aurelianus, such

as at Ancyra and Sinuessa, against the Novatians under Diocletian, as it still happens in the Bohemian and Moravian churches of orthodox brothers, whom out of hatred and envy are called "Picards" or "Boleslavienses" or "Waldenses."

III. Does the Pope have the right to convene a Council?

The Pope has no right or authority to proclaim a Council in any way:

1. Because he has no divine or human right, or even the examples or customs of the most ancient canons or the purest Church, to have such power.
2. Because he has no jurisdiction or superiority over the ministers and auditors of other churches; and the convocation can only be made by someone who has some jurisdiction or authority over those who are called, and, as they say, superiority in the matters for which the convocation is made.
3. Because many Councils were held in the past without the authority or presidency of the Bishop of Rome, and even without his presence. The three most famous Councils, and those of the greatest authority in the Church, were held absent from the Bishop of Rome, and were attended and presided over by Eustathius, Bishop of the Church of Antioch, Gregory of Constantinople, and Cyril of Alexandria.
4. Because the Pope, along with his Cardinals and other prelates, is one of the parties involved in the dispute. No reason allows him to have the right to convene the Council when he himself is the defendant or the plaintiff.
5. Because the Pope is accused by a large part of Christianity of many serious crimes, such as impiety, tyranny in the occupied Church, corrupted religion, sacrilege, and many other crimes, not even the least and most insignificant of men can charge or cite him.

IV. Who should be invited and admitted to the council?

To the council should be invited and admitted representatives of all churches professing the gospel of Christ, even those from foreign countries, and not just from one party, but also from the other party of the disagreement, whose affairs are being dealt with, and whose errors have not been legitimately proven from Sacred Scripture.

Representatives of the churches should be, first and foremost, peaceful theologians, especially the main defenders of conflicting doctrines, as well

as lay-people (whom they call), who are not inferior in excellence of gifts and understanding of heavenly doctrine, and sometimes even superior to pastors, and more suitable for discussions on doctrine.

These laypeople, chosen and sent by the churches, whether they be academic leaders or political figures, should be admitted with equal rights for discussion and expression of opinions, along with the others.

V. On the location of the council.

The location of the council should be suitable for convening and safe from the fear of ambushes and hostile violence, so that no one is deterred from attending the council due to the long distance of travel or difficulty or danger. For in the fear of danger, serious and important matters cannot be dealt with, let alone dealt with freely and accurately.

VI. Under what conditions should all participants in the council be bound?

Participants in the council should be bound by the following conditions:

1. To speak their opinions freely.
2. To not be sworn to any particular or private Confession.
3. To not be bound to the authority of Princes or their own teachers in matters of religion.
4. To all bind themselves sacredly and religiously by public oath, that they will hold nothing in place of Sacred Scripture, prophetic and apostolic, as foundation and rule of faith. Thus, according to the Scriptures, the apostles themselves decreed in the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).
5. To lay aside all prejudices, except for the written word of God.
6. To act modestly and peacefully and give no room for envy, hate, unseasonable zeal, and bitterness.

VII. What are the goals of the Council?

The goals of the Christian Council are:

1. To confirm and clarify the truth of Christ against heresies that have been previously disproven by divine testimony and legitimately condemned by the Catholic Church, such as the Samosatenian,

Arian, Marcionite, Manichaean, Nestorian, Eutychian, Novatian, Pelagian, and similar heresies.
2. To seriously search for truth in matters related to the foundations of faith that are publicly discussed in the Church and cannot be resolved privately.
3. To establish laws and canons for the governance of the Church that consider the different circumstances of time, place, and people.

Conclusion. Therefore, the goal of the Council is not to confirm earthly peace, but rather the truth of Christ: not the elimination of disputes, but of lies. Matthew 10:34-36: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be those of his own household."

VIII. In which Councils is Christ present or not present?

Christ is present in those Councils that are gathered in the name of Christ, that is, for the lawful and holy pursuit and confirmation of Christ's truth. Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

However, Christ is not present in those Councils that are not gathered in the name of Christ, but rather for the establishment of heresies, for the unjust condemnation of the innocent without a hearing, and for the confirmation of the glory, impiety, and tyranny of priests, such as the Councils of the Papacy.

The history of the Roman Council under Balthasare Cossa is well known, whose consecrator and initiator, as Nicholas de Clemangiis writes, was a rogue, with his deadly song.

IX. Deciding Ecclesiastical suits without prejudice.

The judge of ecclesiastical controversies is twofold: Supreme and Ministerial.

The SUPREME JUDGE is only the Word of God, comprehended in the Prophetic and Apostolic writings. Or, in other words, only God, speaking in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.

This judge alone is authentic.

From this judge there is no appeal, and against him, no authority or argument holds any value.

Therefore, every doctrine that agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scripture, and the Catholic symbols, must be accepted; if it is not in agreement, it must be rejected.

The MINISTERIAL JUDGE is the entire Council, whose duty is to inquire into the judgment of Scripture on a controversial doctrine in Scripture and to also show it to others.

X. Are the presiders of the Council judges?

The presiders of the Council are not judges:

1. Because the presiders themselves are also necessarily on one side of the litigants.
2. Because the Council is called together for them as well as for others, to teach or to confirm.
3. Because it would be unnecessary for the Council to be committed to the judgment of the presiders alone, as it could be committed to them without the Council.
4. Because the Council is gathered so that judgment on all matters is not made by a few.
5. Because if this were the case, the authority of the presiders would be greater than that of the Council, which would certainly be absurd.

XI. What then is the duty of the presiders?

To govern and moderate the entire action of the Council, as guardians of the law indicate the time of convening; call the assembly; propose the agenda; question the opinions, and with the help of the clerks collect them; and also speak their own opinion, with the same right as the others.

XII. The first classification of Councils.

Councils are either of the Prophets and Apostles, or of other bishops.

Those that were celebrated by the Prophets and Apostles surpass all exceptions.

Such was the Israelite Council, of which the Prophet Elijah was president (1 Kings 18).

Such was the Apostolic Council, which is described in Acts 15.

Councils that were or are celebrated today by other bishops of the Church are in no way equal to those of the Prophets and Apostles, nor should their authority be equated with that of sacred Scripture.

1. It is necessary to maintain a permanent distinction between Prophets, Apostles, and other ministers of the Church, as they alone have laid the foundation, like skilled craftsmen, while the others at least build on the foundation that has been laid by them.
2. Many of these Councils have issued impious, false, and blasphemous decrees. Who does not know that the Council of Carthage under Cyprian, as well as the second Council of Ephesus, the Council of Ariminum, the Council of Syrmium, and many others, have greatly erred against the Council of Nicaea?
3. Because these councils are contradictory to each other. For the third council of Carthage considered the Apocryphal books as canonical, while the council of Laodicea denies that they are canonical. As we read in chapter 59: "It should not be allowed to read books that are outside of the canon, only the canonical books of the New and Old Testament should be read. What should be read and accepted as authoritative are these: Genesis, Exodus, etc." Then the remaining books of the Old Testament are listed, which our Church considers canonical. All Apocryphal books are omitted, which our Church also places outside of the canon. Therefore, since the Carthaginian Third Council declares these books to be canonical, it openly conflicts with the Laodicean Council, which clearly denies that these books are canonical.

XIII. Second classification of councils.

A council is either universal or particular. A universal council is one in which the bishops or representatives of all or most of the churches in the entire world gather for the benefit of all the churches.

A particular council is one in which the bishops or representatives of certain specific churches gather, at least for the sake of those churches.

And that is either national or provincial.

A national council is one in which the bishops or delegates of the churches of one nation or kingdom come together.

A provincial council is one in which the bishops or representatives of the churches of one province gather.

XIV. Third classification of councils.

A council is either legitimate or illegitimate.

A legitimate council is one that is gathered in the name of Christ, that is, for the purpose of discovering and confirming the truth of Christ, based on the word of Christ, as passed down through Prophetic and Apostolic writings.

Illegitimate, on the other hand.

1. Because this is the agreement that God once made with the Levitical priests: that they would teach according to his word (Malachi 2:1 and following).
2. Because this is what God always required from the prophets themselves. Jeremiah 1:7, "Whatever I command you, speak," and 19:2, "Proclaim the words that I tell you." Jeremiah 23:28, "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell the dream, and he who has my word, let him speak my word truly. What does straw have in common with wheat?" says the Lord.
3. Because this was also imposed on the apostles themselves. Matthew 28:20, "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Romans 15:18, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey—by word and deed."

XV. Can councils err?

All councils, except for the prophetic and apostolic, can err when they depart from the writings of the prophets and apostles.

1. Because only the Prophets and Apostles cannot err, as even Canon Law acknowledges. For in *Decretals* of Gratian, Part 1, Dist. 9, c. 9, it is cited from Augustine's letter 19 to Jerome: "I learned to fear and honor only those writers who are now called canon, so that I dare not believe that any of them erred in writing."
2. Because many councils can produce enormous errors.

The Second Council of Ephesus, in which more than 300 bishops were present, was called a council of robbers by Pope Leo, who lived during the imperial reigns of Theodosius, Martinian, and Leo. Flavian, the Bishop of Constantinople, was condemned and killed. Leo attributed the truth to Flavian and mendacity to the entire council.

The Council of Carthage, held under Cyprian, erred by decreeing that those who had been baptized by heretics should be re-baptized.

Even the Council of Nicaea, which was a general council, erred, as can be read in the *Tripartite History*, book 2, chapter 14, and also cited in canon law, in the *Decretals*, Part 1, Distinction 31, Chapter 12. It wanted to prohibit marriage for bishops and presbyters, an error that Paphnutius alone opposed and with clear arguments he led the whole council to change the decree.

Therefore, later councils erred, which decreed something different from the Council of Nicaea, which was brought back to the right path by Paphnutius.

The Council of Constance erred in its statement on the Lord's Supper, giving faith to heretics.

3. Because the Canon law itself, *Decretals* of Gratian, part 1, dist. 15, chapter 1 and 2, only equates such councils, namely the Nicene, Ephesian, Chalcedonian, and Constantinopolitan, to the four Gospels. But why does it not attribute this authority to all councils? It is because they can err.

XVI. Given that councils can err, what should be the authority of councils and of what kind?

The authority of legitimate councils should be great among all, but their decrees must be examined carefully against the Holy Scriptures, and those that are consistent with them should be accepted, but those that are in conflict should be repudiated (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:1).

XVII. Differences in Councils.

1. A council of even the most pious pastors does not represent the universal Church, but is only a principal member and, as it were, the flower of particular churches of the universal Church.
2. It is not allowed for councils to establish laws and dogmas that bind the conscience.
3. The council is not above Scripture.
4. The council does not have the power to decide anything against Scripture.

XVIII. Why should we be concerned with the testimony of Councils?

We do not use or accept the testimony of Councils for the purpose of confirming our doctrine, as if they alone, without the authority of Sacred Scripture, would be sufficient for the confirmation of any doctrine. Rather, we do so for the following reasons:

1. Those who are rightly taught by the voice of Scriptures, are also confirmed by the consensus of the orthodox Church, although this testimony is less principal.
2. Because those who attribute more authority to them than is appropriate, or who abuse their statements against the truth, can correctly be refuted by the testimony of those whom they had set up as judges.

XIX. Certain statements of the Fathers regarding Councils.

Jerome says in his letter to the Galatians, "The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is that which has been handed down in the Canon of Scripture; I consider it a crime if anything is decided upon by councils against it."

Gerson who attended the Council of Constance (in which John Hus, a faithful servant and witness of Jesus Christ, was unjustly condemned and burned by the Papists), has this in his book, *On the Examination of Doctrines*, written in Constance:

"Let this consideration be joined with its declaration of a double truth. The first of these he established, that in a case of doctrine, one should believe more in a simple, unauthoritative person who is highly educated in sacred scriptures, than the Pope. The second truth is that such a scholar should oppose a General Council if he believes that the majority is turning away from the opposite of the Gospel due to malice or ignorance."

Panormitanus, in his commentary on the election [of Popes], specifically writes "It is more credible to believe a lay person who quotes scripture, than an entire council together."

To the Lord Jesus Christ be glory forever.

Amen.

2. Confessing Between the Lines: Relating Christ, Scripture, Church, and Creed

Mark A. Garcia

"On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures."

It is principally the Church, not individual Christians, that is in view as the confessor of the Creed, who announces "I believe." The Creed is the Church's confession: I add my confessing voice "I believe" as one among that Body who confesses "We believe." In putting it this way, we distinguish our understanding of confession from what many today mean by "belief" or "faith."

The modern concept of "belief" assumes a highly individual, private, self-conscious, voluntaristic, and existential reality. To believe refers to a personal affirmation or a strongly held conviction, usually regarding truths or ideas. Belief is assumed to be something highly private, something "personal" in the sense of autobiographical, and mysteriously subjective and "beneath" the words we may use, either ambiguously or not at all related to reason.

In contrast, early Christians regarded belief as communal as well as personal, as anchored in objective reality rather than one's feelings, and as having a central concern with matters of action and behavior and not only truths mentally or verbally assented to. Believing is a way of capturing through verbal characterization a way of life, not only a set of affirmations. Believing is a matter, at least in part, of embracing as real—practically in behavior as well as verbally in bold proclamation—the world of God's words and works that is objectively true whether we want it to be or not, regardless of our feelings about it. To believe is unquestionably personal, but it is personal inasmuch as we—our very lives—are invariably implicated in the truths to which we assent. This symbiotic relationship is at the heart of the "thicker" sense of belief: *I* believe what *we* believe, and I thus regard myself as folded entirely into the reality of the Body of the Son which the Spirit of confession is gathering and forming, sovereignly and graciously, in space and time. In the Latin text of the Creed, the first words are "I believe in" (*credo in*) and in the Greek text "We believe in" (*pisteuomen eis*). The Creed articulates the truth as something the Church as the Church embraces as the faith-not-sight world in which the Church

lives together under the authority of Holy Scripture across generations and ages. In a confessing church, private voices do not confess as an act of self-realization; instead, each individual adds his or her voice to what is in fact an *ecclesial* confession in the mysterious ministry of the confessing Spirit, locating oneself within the Body by doing so.

Confessing Between the Lines

But whence confession? What is the origin and nature of a creedal affirmation, particularly in relation to the Scriptures? Is creedal confession compatible with an ultimate allegiance to the unique speech of God in Holy Scripture, or is creedal confession instead required by that allegiance? How do we configure the Church's act of confession in relation to the Old Testament Scriptures, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the New Testament Scriptures? These are questions of ancient and enduring importance. But they are also contested questions, exposing as they do considerable confusion in our time regarding related matters, such as what it means for a doctrine to be properly "biblical." Attending to the ways in which the New Testament "theologizes" with respect to matters christological and trinitarian may be helpful here. The Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15, which are among the earliest examples of intra-biblical creeds and which the Nicene Creed quotes directly, set the table for our inquiry in a focused way:

> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain (vv. 1–2).

What is that gospel preached to the saints, received by the saints, in which the saints presently stand, and by which the saints are being saved? May it be captured in a few words of affirmation? The Apostle does exactly this: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received," which tells us that what we are about to hear is a Gospel-creed that was first traditioned to Paul, who now traditions it on to the churches: "That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve …" (vv. 3-5). Paul thus articulates, staccato-like, a set of affirmations concerning Christ. He believes the content of this set of affirmations to be "the Gospel" (thus Christ is the Gospel). Further, he (and the churches in general, even at this very early date) confess this set of affirmations as true "in accordance with the Scriptures."

But what does this mean? We may be able to think readily enough of Old Testament Scriptures which teach, in some sense, that Christ or the Messiah "died for our sins." But there is no Old Testament text which prophesies explicitly that the Messiah would be "raised on the third day," which is quite specific for a prophecy: not on the second day, not on the fourth day, but on the third day. Yet Paul sees this, too, as "in accordance with the Scriptures." The Nicene Creed repeats Paul's language: "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures." This principle of "accordance" deserves careful consideration.

The Lord and the Scriptures

Accordance, in this context, is fundamentally a matter of the alignment, and proper configuration, of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the Christ confessed by the Spirit in the Church, evidenced as early as (and authoritatively in) our New Testament. Accordance is thus a trinitarian reality involving God, the incarnate Christ, and the testifying Spirit before it is a hermeneutical one (the Scriptures). To unpack this set of relationships, while we cannot explore the matter at length, it is important to reflect at least somewhat on the critical and nuanced relationship of YHWH in the Old Testament to the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Not only is it a topic that enjoys a predictably enormous, varied, and often fascinating body of scholarly literature, it is also uniquely helpful for exploring the relationship between creed and Scriptural reading.[1] Observing the phenomenon of New Testament theological "moves" in relation to the Scriptures of the Old Testament along these lines will provide us with the most important insight into the proper meaning of "biblical."

The Hebrew name YHWH is understood by Greek New Testament writers as *kyrios*. In nearly every instance of the New Testament citing the Greek Old Testament (LXX), *kyrios* stands for the divine name YHWH. As the New Testament rendering of YHWH for God's proper name, *kyrios* thus holds unique importance for the nature of the Old Testament's relationship to trinitarian doctrine. But it also discloses a critical hermeneutical move by which the Church's christological and trinitarian orthodoxy

[1] The literature is vast. For a starting point on these issues written by one expertly familiar with ancient Christian and Nicaea-era christological hermeneutics (but not friendly to confessional Reformed commitments regarding some matters), see John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), and particularly Behr, *In Accordance with the Scriptures: The Shape of Christian Theology* (The Didsbury Lectures Series; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2025), 1-27.

proves to be "biblical," namely, as a move that listens "between the (textual) lines" rather than attending only to the lines themselves. A few examples will demonstrate the point.

The words of Joel 3:5 (Hebrew MT; 2:32 in English), "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD (YHWH) shall be saved," are pulled by the Apostle Paul into his argument in Romans 10:13 (they are also used by Peter to the same effect in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:21). As C. Kavin Rowe has demonstrated, the text of Joel 3:5 is essentially the same in the Masoretic text, the LXX, and in Romans 10. Paul refers to "the name of the Lord" (*to onoma kyriou*) christologically, however, establishing an identity of subject between the YHWH of the MT and the Lord Jesus Christ in Romans.[2] Particularly against the background of the Torah's relentless and insistent monotheism (there is only one YHWH), the association of Joel 3:5 with the salvation found exclusively in Jesus Christ in Rom. 10:13 yields, for Paul, the theological conception of Jesus Christ as identifiable with YHWH "in accordance with" the Scriptures. Paul, reckoning with the risen Jesus and the exclusive and saving Name of YHWH in Joel, makes the theological move in his affirmation that to call upon Jesus is the same as to call upon YHWH. "The salvific name in its original context was YHWH; now the salvific name is Jesus. In Joel the Israelites would have called out 'YHWH' to be saved, and now in Romans all would call out 'Jesus.'"[3]

We may bring alongside Romans 10:13 other examples of the New Testament identification of Jesus with YHWH under the name *kyrios* that do not constitute an appeal to a predictive prophecy. In the case of John 20:28, for instance, Thomas' confession "My Lord and my God!" does not refer to an Old Testament text, but instead pulls forward a wide range of associated classic liturgical refrains found in Psalm 29:3 (LXX); 34:23-24 (LXX); 85:15 (LXX); and 87:2 (LXX), alongside similar language in the Prophets (Jer. 38:18 LXX; Zech. 13:9 LXX). The result of this act of association is the affirmation of an ontological identity of YHWH (*ho kyrios ho theos*) with the risen Jesus Christ (*ho kyrios ho theos*) without the loss of a distinction between them—a distinction which the Gospel of John as a whole repeatedly reflects as the Sender and Revealer is distinguished from the Sent and Revelation.

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2 C. Kavin Rowe, "Romans 10:13: What is the Name of the Lord?" *HBT* 22:2 (2000): 135-73; also Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11:3 (2002): 295-312. C. H. Dodd argued for seeing Joel 3:5 as a key *testimonium* for the early church: Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 28-29; cf. Rowe, "Biblical Pressure," 301.

3 Rowe, "Biblical Pressure," 302.

A host of other examples are relevant to a fuller discussion and have been explored by others. We might include 2 Corinthians 3:17a in which we learn that the Spirit, too, is *kyrios* in the sense in which both the Father and the Son are the *kyrios*, i.e., the Spirit fully shares the divine Name, while being distinct from both Father and Son. Paul here appears to be glossing Exodus 34:24 with the ministries of the Lord and the Spirit. Accenting a different facet of the trinitarian picture, Galatians 4:4-6 unfolds the divine economy as reflective of a trinitarian ontology. The Spirit of the Father's Son testifies to the Father of the Son who is, of course, therefore the Son of the Father. In Romans 8:9-11, "of Christ" and "of God" are treated interchangeably with reference to the Spirit who is the "Spirit of God" (*pneuma theou*) and "Spirit of Christ" (*pneuma christou*).[4] We could go on.

None of these key examples of New Testament christological and trinitarian creed-like theology fit the conventional portrait of Old Testament predictive prophecies being read and used as such, at least in a direct fashion, by New Testament counterparts. Instead, in this body of scriptural witnesses we come face to face with a feature of the New Testament theological "method" that is key to understanding the nature of christological and trinitarian confession. Rather than finding Old Testament texts serviceable as "proofs" of the divinity of Jesus, the New Testament writers instead display a sensitivity to a *pressure* exerted upon them by the abiding, continuing authoritative witness of the Old Testament *set alongside* the fact of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.[5] What has transpired in Jesus Christ, and what has been revealed concerning him, forces christological and trinitarian questions to be asked, not apart from but precisely in terms of the Old Testament Scriptures as such. These two realities, brought alongside one another, forced, as it were, christological and trinitarian "and therefores" which may be appropriately characterized as pressured confessions. The pressure, however, is not in the direction of Old Testament text to New Testament formulation, but is rather located in between the lines of the Old Testament Scriptures set alongside the fact of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament's christological and trinitarian affirmations, therefore, are neither affirmations of "fulfillment" nor examples of theological innovation. They are instead the confessional *responses* to this pressure. "According to the Scriptures" has precisely this sense, and refers to the felt pressure that results from the "alongsided-ness" of Scripture and Christ; it does not refer to the use of the Old Testament as evidentiary proof for New Testament

[4] These are examples discussed by Rowe in "Biblical Pressure."

[5] The helpful language of "pressure" in this context is from Brevard Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 6:1 (1997): 16-26.

confessional affirmations. Furthermore, we should not limit this phenomenon to the New Testament writers; instead, we should appreciate that the nature of the Spirit's ministry in the Church of every age is precisely to continue to pressure the Church to confess the truth concerning Father and Son in these ways.[6]

This set of considerations also helps us with the sense of the Creed's language, citing the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15, that "The *third day* he rose again *according to the Scriptures*." "According to the Scriptures" means according to the Old Testament in particular, but there are no Old Testament texts that predict a *third-day* resurrection in a form recognized by conventional evangelical hermeneutics. Does this mean that Paul is mistaken? Rather than teach that the Old Testament overtly *anticipates* or *predicts* the third-day resurrection, the Creed (as Paul centuries earlier) intends that the Old Testament *teaches* the third-day resurrection. To hear the Old Testament teaching this point, to feel, as it were, the pressure the Old Testament exerts in the direction of a *third-day* expectation for resurrection, one would have to think beyond predictive prophecy for how the Old Testament speaks. One would need to become attuned, as Paul was, to its speech between the lines, to the "and therefores" that arise from hearing the Scriptures properly in the light of and alongside Lord Jesus Christ. Various arguments have been proposed for *how* the Old Testament teaches the third-day resurrection (usually with the Feast of Firstfruits and the Levitical festal calendar in view), but that it *does*—even without an explicit text that does so—is the most important point.[7]

Circumcision, Baptism, and the Christ of Scripture: Rethinking Typological Referentiality

At least one question emerges from appreciation of this "between the lines" theological move which results from the pressure inherent in the Old Testament's witness to Jesus Christ, namely, the question of Christ's personal

[6] This point is picked up for investigation in the essay below on the Holy Spirit, which serves as "part two" of the present essay.

[7] See also Jacob Thiessen, "Firstfruits and the Day of Christ's Resurrection: An Examination of the Relationship Between the 'Third Day' in 1 Cor. 15:4 and the 'Firstfruit' in 1 Cor. 15:20," *Neotestamentica* 46(2) (2012): 379-393; Joel White, "'He was Raised on the Third Day According to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:4): A Typological Interpretation Based on the Cultic Calendar in Leviticus 23," *Tyndale Bulletin* 66(1) (2015): 103-119; and Stephen Dempster, "From Slight Peg to Cornerstone to Capstone: The Resurrection of Christ on 'the Third Day' According to the Scriptures," *Westminster Theological Journal* 76(2) (Fall 2014): 371-409.

relationship to that older Testament and its people. The New Testament will not permit us to see Jesus Christ merely as the later fulfillment of earlier prophetic words and types, as one who enters a world prepared beforehand by a Torah in which he is not personally present and active, or who introduces a meaning to that Testament that is not nascent to it from the outset. But how can we speak of the relation of the Testaments to one another if not in this admittedly conventional way, one routinely put on display in popular explanations of New Testament realities as merely foreshadowed (and thus displaced) by Old Testament ones? A shadow, after all, is an indication of someone's *presence*, not absence, and yet evangelical readings tend to treat the Old Testament's shadowy character as a synonym of the Son's absence. How, then, is Christ, who is above and beyond history, related personally to that history without being swallowed by it? The matter is given a fine point in the affirmation of the Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 that

> This covenant [of grace extending from at least Adam's sin to the new creation] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foresignifying Christ to come; *which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation*; and is called the old testament (emphasis mine).

The Confession is clear that Christ was "foresignified" but also that the Christ-to-come was "efficacious" before his incarnation *through* the rites of the old administration. He was also "sufficient" for the older saints: their relationship to him created the effect of saving benefits, which means at minimum that, long before the incarnation and atonement were historically accomplished, the Christ-to-come efficaciously ministered by the Spirit through the older rites was "enough" for them. Contemporary Christians are quite comfortable with the idea of foresignification; handbooks on biblical interpretation and much evangelical preaching suggest this is the usual way Christ is related to the Old Testament. But the Christ who is efficacious and sufficient for salvation within and in the Old Testament—without a kind of suspended relationship to the New Testament—is at least a more foreign way of speaking.

If Christ is "between the lines" of the Old Testament Scriptures themselves when heard properly in light of their nascent locus of meaning in God's Son—however much later revelation will unfold the content and clarity of this relationship—we may expect some help here by attending to the question of the actual referent of Old Testament types, ceremonies,

etc. I suggest we have a resource for this question in an easily overlooked but highly relevant feature of the work of Geerhardus Vos, the Princeton theologian often called the "father" of Reformed biblical theology. In his early-career classroom lectures published recently under the title *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vos addresses the topic: "Show that there is no difference, as Roman Catholics think that there is, between the sacraments of the old and the new covenants." Though Vos is entirely unoriginal here—and consulting the long tradition of Christian reflection on this topic before Vos would prove enlightening and enriching—if carefully considered, his response to this question could serve admirably to correct a range of mischaracterizations of Reformed teaching on Scripture, the relation between the testaments, the covenants, and the sacraments.

His first point of response directs attention to the Apostle's argument in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, in which "Paul ascribes to the Old Testament church *our* baptism and *our* Lord's Supper, so far as the thing signified is concerned" (emphases mine). The nuance Vos works with here should not be missed: our (the New Testament Church's) baptism and Supper are *the same* baptism and Supper enjoyed by the Old Testament Church, something appreciable when we understand the *res* (reality) to which *our* baptism and Supper refer sacramentally: Christ. The one Christ is the same Christ for the Church of any age, before and after the historical incarnation, for he is the *res* for the Church wherever in history she is found.

In an important respect, this point relativizes history in service of the Christ in whom all history holds together (Col. 1:17), inasmuch as the Christ of the eucharistic Table is one and the same as the Christ of Adam and Abraham and Moses and David even "before" he is crucified in history. In fact, to be troubled by the relationship of the "before-ness" of Christ in historical terms to sacramental and soteriological union with him is a confusion of categories, for the theological reality of Lord Jesus Christ is "prior" to history as such. That same Christ is not merely pre-viewed before the events of the first century (a largely cognitive category); he is *efficacious*. It will be immediately appreciated that Vos's move here is wholly consistent with Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5.

Vos continues by explaining that, in terms of Paul's teaching to the Corinthians, if the same spiritual food and drink, as benefits of salvation, were present to, available to, and enjoyed by "the fathers" who were "all under the cloud and all passed through the sea," and "baptized into Moses" in cloud and sea, "then they certainly must have been signified and sealed by the usual sacraments."

After noting circumcision in particular as a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith for Abraham (Gen. 17:7; Rom. 4:11), Vos then adds a series

of remarks prompted by circumcision which may well surprise one or two readers, but which represent his key interest. It is conventional, but at least misleading if not simply mistaken, to hear that Reformed Christians regard Christian baptism as the fulfillment of circumcision. Even Reformed writers commonly make this argument. Vos explains why this is an error:

> All this does not detract from the fact that the sacraments of the old covenant had their typological side. In the old covenant, everything had two aspects (Heb. 10:1; Col. 2:17). But *they were types of Christ, and not of our sacraments.* The shadow is a type of the *body*, not of the *sign* of the body. The latter are called antitypes... But this intends only to say that they are counterparts of the Old Testament sacraments *insofar as they, in a sacramental manner of speaking, represent the thing signified. Not baptism itself but what is signified and sealed by baptism is really the antitype, and then insofar as baptism portrays this, baptism itself* (emphases mine).[8]

This statement deserves an extensive exposition against the background of the traditional and Reformed Orthodox position which Vos here reflects, but for now only a few observations will have to suffice.

Firstly, we note that, for Vos, the older sacraments were (are) not types of New Testament sacraments. That would be to draw a horizontal and historical line where we should instead see something like a triangle.[9] The older sacraments were types of Christ. New Testament sacraments, too, refer to Christ. The older sacraments, including circumcision, are not types of the New Testament *sacraments*, including baptism. Circumcision is not "fulfilled" in Christian baptism. Circumcision refers to Christ already on its own terms, and it doesn't require baptism to do so. Christian baptism, too, refers to Christ. Circumcision and baptism do not refer to one another. The shadow, as Vos puts it, is not a type of a *sign* of the body, but of the Body itself.[10]

Secondly, the relationship between the New Testament sacraments and the older sacraments is christological and not primarily historical. Now, we must take care here to avoid a common and widespread misstep. To say the sacraments are christological in relationship is not to say

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8 Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics: A System of Christian Theology*, trans. and ed. by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (single volume edition; Lexham Press, 2020), 948.

9 Vos's perspective here and elsewhere coheres well with, and is in my judgment significantly deepened and enriched by, the similar concerns (which also include the use of lines and shapes) in Behr, *In Accordance with the Scriptures.*

10 Whether Vos means the ecclesial or the christological body is not clear, but in fact both are accurate in different senses inasmuch as the Church, which is the Body of Christ, derives her form from her Head.

something about a merely or primarily *cognitive* reality (the older "look forward to, promise," etc. Christ), as though circumcision "teaches us about" or "shows us" the Christ who will come later. Though there is some important truth in this, it is quite inadequate as a whole or even central explanation. The christological relationship sacraments enjoy is not merely or primarily cognitive but a fundamentally personal and efficient (effective) reality. The "sacramental manner of speaking" Vos speaks of is that manner of speaking in which signs in any epoch refer to the singular christological reality, Christ himself the eternal Son who is also the crucified and risen Son, who is the "thing signified," and not to one another. Thus, the antitype of circumcision is not baptism but the One to whom both circumcision and baptism refer: Christ.

As a result, their similarities are not due to common features in meaning or administration. Preoccupation with the apparent similarities between circumcision and baptism can overlook something Vos is keen to insist on: the Old Testament saints are baptized, and the New Testament saints are circumcised. It can also operate with a problematic theological framework in which the external work of God in *oikonomia*/history (*economia*) instead of the eternal God (*theologia*) is the controlling category. Instead, their (altogether predictable) similarities are due to their common reference to the same Object, Christ, not to one another. The real relationship that exists between circumcision and baptism is therefore indirect and derivative: they both refer to the same *res*, Christ, and thus, for that reason and only in this way, "insofar as baptism portrays [Christ, the true antitype]" we may speak circuitously (the philosophers would say "improperly") of baptism in antitypical terms.

To pull these varied observations together, we make the following suggestion: Vos's unoriginal redirection of attention away from the befores-and-afters of a historical preoccupation and to the efficacious and saving Christ above and for all human history helps clarify that the Church's act of confessing Christ as the eternal Son of the Father made man for us and for our salvation is not an apostolic or post-apostolic novelty. It is certainly not rooted merely in the decisions reached by church councils, though it is enriched and advanced by such efforts toward greater faithfulness to Christ. Instead, confessing Christ is an act arising from the Scriptures of the Old Testament themselves in response to the confessional pressure exerted by the Spirit in connection with the Scriptures and in the face of the risen One. To theologize and to confess "in accordance with the Scriptures" requires, therefore, a reconsideration of what qualifies a doctrine as "biblical," including a critically important sensitivity to *how* and *where* the Spirit speaks, which is not only in and by the lines but also between them.

3. We Believe: Historical and Pastoral Reflections on the Story of Nicaea and the Doctrine of the Son

Alex Tabaka

From House Church to Imperial Court

How shall we begin to tell the story of this beloved and ancient symbol of the Christian faith? Just as much as the Nicene Creed stands at the headwaters of the subsequent 1700 years (and counting) of theological and doxological reflection, so is it also a certain arrival point of a multitude of streams of preparation. The full backstory of the creed would demand a small library of careful volumes. In this brief essay, many historical details will need to be left unmentioned and many theological paths untrodden. Nevertheless, this essay will endeavor at least to gesture toward the thrill and grandeur of a story that culminated with the meeting of the 318[1] in the city of Nicaea in 325 AD. In the interests of brevity, at key points in the words that follow we will borrow a little rhetorical technique from the Epistle to the Hebrews and deploy it for our own purposes.

And what more shall we say? For time would fail us to tell the story of how the Fullness of Time (Galatians 4:4) and the Kingdom of God (Matthew 4:17) arrived in the midst of one of the greatest empires this present age has witnessed. Time would fail us to tell the story of how the *dictator perpetua*[2] of Julius Caesar (44 BC) became the *in hoc signo, vinces* of Constantine the Great (312 AD).[3] Have the politics of any empire witnessed a more thunderously vicissitudinal 400-year period? Time would fail us to tell the story of how the infant New Covenant Church made her own journey from the house churches of the apostolic age to the imperial court of

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1 The traditional number of elders to have met at the council (symbolizing the number of Abraham's servants in Genesis 14, though the number varies in different accounts between 200 and 300).

2 "Perpetual Dictator," the self-proclaimed title of Julius who marked the transition from the Roman Republic to what we now know as the Roman Empire.

3 "By this sign, you will conquer." In the Greek, *Ἐν Τούτῳ Νίκα*. The phrase uttered by the risen Christ in the vision of Constantine prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (311) as reported by Eusebius (early fourth century, Eusebius died in 339 with the work uncompleted).

Constantinople and the great basilicas of Constantine and his successors; and of the final tumultuous stretch of this journey, from the Diocletianic Persecution (begun in February 303) to the Edicts of Serdica (311) and Milan (February 313).[4] In the midst of the Great Persecution (303-311), who would have dared to think that in roughly two decades, the emperor of the Rome would be looking after the well-being of the Church and would call for an ecumenical council to address theological errors threatening the unity and fidelity of that Church? How many prayers were offered up at the Throne of Grace to this end? God knows.

In Fair Alexandria We Lay Our Scene

Beauty, deformity, together thrown,
A maze of ruins, date, design unknown,—
Such is the scene –– the conquest Time hath won—
Such the famed city built by Philip's son.[5]

While the city of Nicaea lies to the west of the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara in modern-day Turkey, any narrative of the origin of the Nicene Creed must begin in North Africa, in the city of Alexandria (founded 311 BC). Again, time fails us to recount the story of how "the famed city built by Philip's son" became the center of the Hellenistic world; or how, in due time, Alexandria also became the intellectual center of early Christian thought. Under the Ptolemaic Kingdom (305–30 BC), Hellenistic culture and intellectual achievement flourished.[6] Within the thriving Jewish community of Alexandria, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, was produced in the third century BC. The great Jewish thinker Philo called Alexandria home in the first century BC.

We are tempted to think of ancient cities as quaint, quiet places, like Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood, where everyone knows your name. Not so Alexandria (and quite a good number of other ancient cities!). At the start of the first century BC, Alexandria spanned 4 square miles and had a

[4] And onward to the Edict of Thessalonika (380 AD) and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, which exceeds the historical boundaries of this essay.

[5] Nicholas Michell, from the poem, *Ruins of Many Lands* (William Tegg & Co., 1854).

[6] The great Mouseion and the Library of Alexandria are the enduring emblems of the intellectual achievements of the Hellenistic world during this period, which stood as the auspicious backdrop for the scientific exploits of none less than Euclid, Archimedes, and Eratosthenes (the first director of the library and the first to calculate the circumference of the Earth, within 2% of modern measurements!).

population estimated at between 500,000 to 600,000. Saint Mark brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Alexandria in the mid-first century AD, and Christianity flourished. By the end of the century, Alexandria had roughly 1,000,000 inhabitants. Jerome tells us that Mark himself established a catechetical school in Alexandria and appointed Justus as the head in 62 AD. The Catechetical School of Alexandria grew and matured through the teaching and writing labors of such early luminaries of Christian thought as Clement (dean from 190-202) and Origen (d. 253 AD).

Suffice it to say, Alexandria was uniquely primed (both in terms of intellectual heritage and geographical location) to be center stage for the playing out of the theological controversies of the early church. This would most certainly prove to be the case when, in 313 AD, a presbyter and priest by the name of Arius began his ministry in Alexandria at the Church of the Baucalis.[7] However, before we look directly at Arius and his teaching, an important point needs to be made. The doctrinal position that directly occasioned the Council of Nicaea is now known to us as Arianism, named after Arius. Because of this, it might be easy to stumble into the assumption that in the fourth century there was this distinct group of self-proclaimed "Arians" that all rallied around Arius as their leader. This is not so. Arius did not start his own sect. Rather, he placed his finger (in a uniquely compelling way, to be sure) on what was already an exposed nerve in the Church's doctrine of Christ. There had been a theological question brewing for centuries, a question for which a variety of answers had been put forward, a question that, through Arius' teaching and influence, came to an agitated head and demanded clarity.

"Who Do You Say That I Am?"

From the beginning, the confession of the New Covenant Church was unified, perhaps best exemplified by the cry of faith that we see in Thomas (we dare not call him doubting!), as his unbelief evaporates in the presence of the risen Christ: "My Lord, and my God!" (John 20:28 ESV). The Church worshipped Jesus as God. The Church also, simultaneously and without qualification, worshiped the Son of God in absolute continuity with the ancient faith of their spiritual forefathers: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The question that came to an agitated head was straightforward. How, and in what manner, is the worship of Jesus, as the Christ and the Son of God, compatible with the uncompromising

[7] A church of unique historical importance in Alexandria, built on the site of Saint Mark's martyrdom.

monotheism of the faith as revealed to Moses? Did worshiping the Father as true God and the Word of the Father as equally God mean that Christians worshiped two gods and were therefore just another species of the polytheism of the ancient world?

There were two primary solutions for resolving this apparent dilemma. One solution takes its name from a priest of the third century named Sabellius, who taught that the designations of Father, Son, and Spirit do not speak of anything eternally distinct within the Godhead; they are simply modes of presentation. Sometimes God presents as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Spirit (as one actor might put on a variety of masks to play different roles). Different variations of this heresy became known as Sabellianism. The specter of polytheism is avoided, of course, but the Church saw immediately that the solution was a betrayal of the Scriptural testimony regarding the distinctness of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Sabellius and his error (sometimes also known as Monarchianism) were condemned by Callixtus I in 220 AD.

In Monarchianism, the divine Logos does not have a particular existence except as a mode by which the one undifferentiated god manifests himself. Another solution came forward that seemed to solve the problem of Sabellius' teaching: Subordinationism. In Subordinationism, the divine Logos does indeed have a particular existence (as is clearly evident in the Word of God), but only as, in some sense, lesser than and subordinate to the one true God. The Hellenistic mind, breathing in the Platonic thought that had been developing for centuries,[8] was accustomed to the idea of an inaccessible god who is mediated to the physical world through a variety of demiurges and/or emanations. The solution of Subordinationism was naturally attractive. The acceptance of Jesus as the Logos of God was an easy step for the Greek mind, so long as one conceived of the Logos as a lesser manifestation of a more primal deity.

All this brings us back to Arius. Arius was quite brilliant in achieving a particular double emphasis. He exalted the divine transcendence; he waxed eloquent concerning the unapproachable uniqueness of God. However, for Arius this meant necessarily distancing the Logos from the one God. However, in doing so, he nevertheless emphasized what he believed to be the truly exceptional nature of Jesus. He was no mere man. Arius was a Subordinationist, but he was no mere Adoptionist. Jesus was not simply

[8] From the writings of Plato himself, through the Middle Platonism of the 1st and 2nd centuries, to the entrance of Neoplatonism in the 3rd century through Plotinus (a contemporary of Origen and a fellow student under the same Platonic master, Ammonius Sacchus!).

a God-indwelt man; he was the first and greatest creature of God. These points allowed Arius to exalt the uniqueness of the unapproachable God, while simultaneously exalting the uniqueness of Christ among all of God's creatures. For someone wanting to have a Christian profession, but with a doctrine of Christ still amenable to certain Hellenistic conceptions of the relationship between God, His intermediaries, and the physical world, Arius ticked all the boxes. His teaching spread like wildfire.[9]

We are limited in our ability to reconstruct the finer contours of Arius' thought, because we only have three texts that can be directly linked to Arius' own hand,[10] in addition to fragments of Arius' poetic work, the *Thalia*. Careful work has been done to analyze these works, both against each other and in light of the views and motives ascribed to Arius by others, particularly Athanasius.[11] However, we know clearly how the Council of 325 viewed the core teaching of Arius as the Creed characterizes Arius' teaching in its anathemas:

> But as for those who say, *there was when He was not*, and, *before being born He was not*, and *that He came into existence out of nothing*, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change, these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

The Nicene fathers were not beguiled by Arius's lofty exaltation of the Logos. No matter how highly you speak of the Son, if you deny Him coeternity with the Father and rank Him among creatures, you resist the witness of the Scriptures, you denigrate the divine majesty of His Person, and, ultimately, you destroy the Gospel altogether. Though Arius' spoke with eloquence concerning the transcendence of God and the exceptional character of the Logos, his teaching was perfectly and tragically clear on this all-important point. Christ was a creature.

Against this, the Nicene fathers issued their vehement reply: the Son is γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί (the Son is begotten, not made, *consubstantial with the Father*). The Father and the Son are not *other* when their essence is in view. Confessing Jesus as God does not mean confessing Jesus as one god amongst a pantheon of other mediating beings, or as a divine emanation, or as the greatest of all created beings. Confessing Jesus

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[9] Both in rapidity and destructive power. Writing as a resident of Los Angeles in 2025, this image has particular poignant force.

[10] A confession of faith delivered to Alexander of Alexandria, a letter written to Eusebius of Nicomedia, and another confession delivered to Emperor Constantine.

[11] E.g. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Rev. Ed. (W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

as God means confessing Him as the one, true, and living God whom we are called to love with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might.[12]

If it is hard for us to understand the strength and vigor of the anathemas at the end of the Creed, perhaps it will be helpful to remember that the Nicene fathers were not pronouncing condemnation on those who did not subscribe to their preferred set of terms and propositions, like petty schoolboys squabbling on the playground. The important thing about the language of consubstantiality is not the form of the words, but the Scriptural meaning they served to represent. The Nicene fathers were pronouncing condemnation on those who did not know the Father because they did not receive the one whom the Father sent. The anathemas of the Creed are simply and faithfully applying the statements of Jesus concerning unbelief: "Whoever believes in Him [God's Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18).

As we will discuss a little more later in this essay, the Nicene fathers did not consider their creed a theoretical statement concerning propositions touching on an isolated and peripheral part of the Christian faith. The Person and work of the Son is the Christian faith. The eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, and all of what that means for the temporal mission of the Son in the incarnation–this is the Christian life! How could it be otherwise? The living God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Alpha and the Omega, the One from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things. The Nicene Creed understands that all theological discourse worthy of the name Christian is a careful working out, in light of the testimony of God's Word, of Jesus' great question: Who do you say that I am?

Arius answered wrongly. And in so doing, he was imperiling the salvation of souls and the peace and purity of the Church. In 321 AD, Alexander of Alexandria presided over a council in Alexandria that condemned Arius' teaching. Arius left Alexandria, first for Palestine and then for Asia Minor, and found influential support from a variety of teachers in the Church, most notably perhaps in Eusebius of Nicomedia. After Constantine defeats Licinius in 324 AD at the Battle of Chrysopolis and becomes the sole ruler of the once more united empire, the emperor is soon confronted with the realization that the controversy over Arius' views is not going to simply go away, but will continue to spread if left unchecked. And so it is that for the good of the Church and the peace of his kingdom, Constantine calls for a Council of bishops in 325 to decide the matter. After the Council, Constantine wrote to the churches:

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[12] Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

> Having had full proof, in the general prosperity of the empire, how great the favor of God has been towards us, I have judged that it ought to be the first object of my endeavors, that unity of faith, sincerity of love, and community of feeling in regard to the worship of Almighty God, might be preserved among the highly favored multitude who compose the Catholic Church.[13]

Constantine further reflects on the events of the council and declares that, "every question received due and full examination, until that judgment which God, who sees all things, could approve, and which tended to unity and concord, was brought to light, so that no room was left for further discussion or controversy in relation to the faith."[14] A beautiful sentiment, to be sure, but not one that would age particularly well, as the subsequent decades would see an increase, not a decrease, of discord over the continuing influence of different species of Arian thinking.

It would take the remainder of the fourth century to work out the implications of the Creed of 325. Time fails to speak of the exploits of Athanasius the Great and his tempestuous 45-year episcopate in Alexandria. Athanasius was only a young deacon and a secretary under Alexander at the Council of Nicaea, but in the decades that followed he assumed the mantle of the foremost defender of Nicene orthodoxy, to be exiled a total of five times by no less than four different emperors. Arianism did not simply evaporate after the Council of Nicaea and would live on through proponents such as the Eunomians and the Homoians, among others (emperors and bishops included!). But the Church would continue to raise defenders of Nicene Orthodoxy in the decades leading up to the Council of Constantinople in 381, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and Gregory of Nyssa. In the creed of 325, however, the foundation had been solidly laid for the Church to build a fortified wall of Scriptural truth to defend the Gospel of Christ from those who would, in denying men and women the true glory of Christ, deny them the glory of the Father as well.

"I Am In The Father, And The Father Is In Me"

We began our historical remembrance of the Council of Nicaea in the city of Alexandria. We begin our theological reflections on the Creed in a different city: Jerusalem, the city of the Great King. On the eve of his crucifixion, the Lord spent an intimate evening of worship and fellowship with his

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13 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III.17 (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889, 2/1:524).

14 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Vita Constantini*, III.17 (NPNF 2/1:524).

disciples in the City of Peace. Much of what was said and done was recorded for us in the Gospel of John, in what we now call the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). What do you suppose occupied the Savior's mind on such a profound occasion and at such a crucial time? The Son of God had one evening left to prepare his disciples for his imminent departure and for the mission that he would be giving to them as his Apostles. What did he spend those final hours speaking to them about?

It is sometimes said that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a "useful" doctrine. It lacks practical application. It is a fine thing for the academic theologians to debate as they tinker with words and phrases, but it does not help the Christian in the nitty-gritty day-to-day life of faith. Why then is Jesus so utterly and thoroughly preoccupied with the doctrine of the Trinity in the final hours that he had to spend with his disciples before his betrayal and crucifixion? Why is it, when he could have spent that time teaching them about whatever he pleased, that he spoke with such rigorous and sustained focus on his relationship with the Father and with the Spirit?

> 'Have I been with you so long, and you still do not me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?' (John 14:9-10a)
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> 'And I will ask the Father and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.' (John 14:16-17a)

This is not just a distinctive feature of the Upper Room Discourse; it is a distinctive feature of the entirety of the Gospels themselves. From the Baptism ("This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"), to the Transfiguration ("This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him"), to the Crucifixion ("Father, into your hands I commit My spirit!"), the Gospels are the revelation of God's Son, and consequently a revelation of the nature of the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit.

In this sense, with the utter preoccupation of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) on the doctrine of the Trinity, it was only to be expected that the evil one would eventually focus his attacks here. Is it a mere coincidence that immediately following the end of the Roman Empire's official persecution of Christianity, the Church found herself attacked, not from without, but from within, by those who would corrupt the testimony of the New Testament concerning the true relationship of the Father and the Son, the very thing that Jesus Himself so delighted to speak about?

However, just as God used the persecution of the Roman Empire for the greater advancement of Christ's Kingdom, so also he has used heresy for

the advancement of the Kingdom as well. Subordinationism, in all of its species, and Arianism, in all of its manifestations, drove and compelled the Church back into the Scriptures to deepen and clarify her articulation of the Scriptural witness concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son. A common feature of all the Trinitarian and Christological discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries is that heretical teachings always marshalled their select curation of Scriptural citations. Arianism was no exception. In the case of Arianism, the exegetical case seemed unimpeachable. Jesus plainly testifies: "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). The Arian controversy was about how the Church reads its Bible as much as anything else. How is it exactly that statements as seemingly contradictory as "The Father is greater than I" and "I and the Father are one" truly cohere in the Christian profession of faith?

What the Arian controversy revealed is that invariably and inevitably, heresy shows itself uninterested in the whole counsel of God. Scripture passages are carefully curated to bolster a preconceived system of thought. In this way, heresy was a tool in the hands of the Spirit to train the early church in principles of sound exegesis. Scripture is not a repository of potentially useful passages for a person to mine for those particular nuggets that appear to support what he already wants to believe. Scripture interprets Scripture. Scripture must be compared against Scripture. The more clear passages interpret the less clear. Statements such as "The Father is greater than I" and "I and the Father are one" must both be unreservedly embraced and confessed as the revelation of God concerning the Person of the Son. And this is exactly what we see. In the decades following the Council of Nicaea, as the Church continued to wrestle mightily with various species of Arian subordinationism, the theologians defending Nicene orthodoxy bequeathed to the Church foundational hermeneutical principles that allow Scripture to (1) interpret itself and to (2) speak for itself as a God-given unity (and not simply as a cherry-picking repository or a take-what-you-like-leave-what-you-don't buffet).

One example of this is the "partitive exegesis" championed by the Cappadocians. From Gregory of Nazianzus, "In sum: you must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was 'made man.'"[15] When Scripture speaks of Christ as created and finite and subordinate to the Father, it speaks with regard to the human nature assumed by the Son in the incarnation. When Scripture speaks of

[15] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 29:18 (NPNF 2/7:301–9).

Christ as eternal and infinite and equal to the Father, it speaks with regard to the divine hypostasis of the Son, to be worshipped and adored along with the Father and the Spirit.

It is worth noting that one hackneyed comment with regard to the Nicene Creed is that it was a capitulation to Greek Philosophy and, therefore, destructive to the simple faith of the early church. Additionally, it is often intimated (or expressly stated) that the Creed proved (as the interposition of a philosophical terminology alien to simple faith) constraining and restricting when it comes to our understanding of God, an artificial imposition that shackles the mystery of God. To borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul: By no means! The truth of the matter is quite nearly the very opposite. It is the heresies of the early church, Arianism chief among them, that constituted the rationalistic interposition of systems of thought alien to the biblical witness. Far from constraining or circumscribing the mystery of God, the Nicene Creed takes up the sword of the Spirit to protect and exalt the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33). The Nicene Creed, as it is founded upon the deeply biblical exegesis of its authors and defenders, recalls the image of the Levitical Priest defending the Holy of Holies from those who would enter in their impurity. The Creed never presumes to circumscribe the Ineffable. As Augustine writes in *De Trinitate*: "Human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence."[16]

Sometimes Trinitarian doctrine is presented as a razor's edge.[17] "Warning!—do not stray too far to either side or you'll fall off. Stray too far to the right and you'll fall off the edge of subordinationism, stray too far to the left and you'll fall off into Sabellianism," etc. The Nicene Creed does not present us with a razor's edge. Indeed, the Creed maps out the Scriptural boundary markers concerning what can and cannot be said about God's Triunity. But in so doing, the faithful are not precariously balancing on a razor's edge; the faithful are led by the hand of the Spirit, speaking through the Scriptures and in the Church, to green pastures and quiet waters. Nicene Orthodoxy is not a tight-rope act. It is a reveling and rejoicing in the infinite depths of the eternal being of the living God as revealed in Holy Scripture. The Nicene Creed proclaims the Trinity to us as our object of worship. Let us call this the Nicene grammar of worship. The proper response of a biblically articulated account of Trinitarian relations is

[16] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.10 (NPNF 1/3:92–3).

[17] Not just Trinitarian doctrine, but other parts of Christian theology as well (e.g. aspects of Soteriology such as justification).

worship. And it is in precisely this way that the Nicene Creed protects and preserves the glorious ineffability of the divine being.

Accordingly, it must be emphasized that the Nicene Creed is not an exploration of a niche aspect of the Christian profession, the tinkering of academic theologians over peripheral details. The Nicene Creed is the proclamation of the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). This is the Gospel. With the coming of the Kingdom in the Person of the God-man, the divine processions of the three Persons are revealed in and through the working out of the divine missions in the history of redemption. We can speak now with full hearts about the eternal Triunity of God because the eternal Son became incarnate, and having accomplished our salvation, poured out the Holy Spirit on the Church from his place of highest exaltation. The Nicene Creed proclaims the heart of the Christian Gospel as the Kingdom of Christ is revealed to the world in the outworking of the redemptive missions of the Holy Trinity.[18]

We might well remember the sort of men who attended the Council of Nicaea. Were they the sheltered academics of the proverbial ivory tower, far removed from the cares and concerns of everyday Christian living? Far from it! Many of these men had themselves lived and suffered through the Diocletianic persecution that had afflicted the Church only 15 years prior, and some of the presbyters arrived at the Council of Nicaea maimed and crippled for the faith, wearing their perseverance on their bodies! One poignant story from the Council is of Paphnutius of Egypt who was hamstrung during torture under Emperor Maximinus and lost his right eye. Emperor Constantine greeted him and honored him by kissing the empty socket where the eye had once been. These men did not come to this Council to dither over insignificant matters, but because they knew the heart of the Gospel for which they had suffered was at stake. This was not a game over words; this was a spiritual battle for the purity of the message that Christ has sent his Church out into the world to proclaim: "We Have Seen His Glory."[19]

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[18] The fuller proclamation of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit was left to the decades following the Council of 325 and finds a more robust expression in the creed of 381. And here, again, we have heresy to thank for the fuller proclamation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. With the rise of Macedonianism/pneumatomachianism the defenders of Nicene Orthodox had to more carefully attend to the Scriptural witness concerning the Person of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* [NPNF 2/8]; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31* [NPNF 2/7:318–28]).

[19] John 1:14.

It is with all this in mind that we might speak, not of the capitulation of Nicaea to Hellenistic thought, but of the destructive power of Nicaea to the various threats that rationalistic systems of human thought posed to the Gospel of Life. We will briefly touch on three ways that this may be explored.

The Theological

Far from being the triumph of Hellenistic philosophy over a primitive Christianity, Nicaea is the triumph of the Scriptural revelation concerning God's eternal and Triune glory over the threat of a subordinationism philosophically amenable to the Hellenistic mind. The Son is not a mediated and diminutive reflection of an inaccessible Father; either as a semi-divine emanation in the spiritual realm of the pleroma (as per Gnosticism), or as a glorious and lofty but nevertheless created being (as per Arianism), or in any other sense conceivable by the idolatrous imagination of the human mind. The relations of the three Persons of the Trinity—the eternal unbegottenness of the Father, the eternal begottenness of the Son, and the eternal procession of the Spirit–simply are the blessed reality whereby the one, true, and living God is the God that he is. We confess this because Scripture teaches it, and we defend it against the rationalistic corruptions of human systems that cannot bear to receive the Word as revealed by the Incarnate Son. The Son and the Spirit are not lesser manifestations of a more primal ur-deity. They are, along with the Father, the effulgence of the undivided essence.

The Soteriological

The revelation of Triune relations is not a cold, philosophical abstraction. It is our salvation. When the Creed declares, "Who for us and our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man," it is forever tying together the revelation of the being of God with the revelation of the salvation of God's people. This is not a mere statement of pious rhetoric, but a theological methodology, a theological grammar, a thunderclap of Gospel truth. Our understanding of salvation can never be divorced from, or considered apart from, the being and character of the God to whom that salvation belongs.

The Evangelistic and Apologetic

One often hears the objection that Christianity is prideful and arrogant because it claims to be the only way to God. On the surface, this objection

seems to have a certain legitimacy. Why shouldn't there be a multiplicity of ways to know the infinite Creator of the universe? The New Testament's answer to this objection is simple, but shattering. There is only one way to the Father because the Father only has one Son. If there were multiple Sons, there would be multiple ways. However, the Son is the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, and "no one has ever seen God; the only-begotten God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). The Son of God is the great Revealer of the Father.

On the terms of Arianism, if there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Father was not. God had to create the Son in order *to become* the Father. This is a point emphasized by Alexander and other Nicene theologians from the start of the controversy. And in this case the Son cannot truly reveal the glory of God, except in a diminished and lesser form. But Nicaea upholds and defends the biblical truth that the Father is the eternal Father, because he is such in relation to the eternal Son. And therefore, the Incarnate Son, as the eternal image (εἰκὼν) of God, is the perfectly fitting Revealer of the Father; and in His Person we truly behold, with eyes of faith, "the radiance of the glory of God" (Hebrews 1:3a).

Moses prayed to the Lord: "Show me your glory" (Exodus 33:18). And should anyone in our own day, led by the Spirit, pray this same prayer or yearn for this same glory, the Nicene Creed takes us by the hand and leads us to the fullness of Scripture's witness concerning the Triune glory of the Living God. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). The glory of the Crucified is the glory of the Only-Begotten, and the glory of the Only-Begotten is the glory of the living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Nicene Creed is perennial and evergreen in its message because it brings us to the Living God who is perennial and evergreen.

The story of Nicaea, as with the whole history of the Church, is the topography of the divine faithfulness. Christ is building his Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). Nicaea brings us to the Holy Trinity, not as a means to some other theological end, but as the Alpha and the Omega of human existence and salvation, the blessed Object of the worship of all creation. And so we may with joy add our yes and amen to the words of Gregory, reflecting on the truths of the Creed:

"To the best of my powers I will persuade all men to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the single Godhead and power, because to Him belong all glory, honor, and might for ever and ever. Amen."[20]

[20] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31* (NPNF 2/7:318–28).

4. "Because They Are in Accordance with the Word of God:" Three Case Studies in Reformed Deployment of the Creeds

T. M. Rester

How did Reformed churches balance scriptural authority with creedal tradition in their confessional standards? With respect to the role of the creeds, there is an interesting line of evolution and development in Calvin's later practice of explicit endorsement and articulation of the relationship between Scripture and ancient creeds. This practice was taken up and subsequently received, albeit with continuing qualifications, among various Reformed confessions. This is not the single starting point of this practice, but as the confessions of various regional churches developed, so did a general consensus among the Reformed internationally. "The Nicene Creed" among the early modern Reformed generally meant the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, not simply the formula of 325, and it was most often grouped with the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed under the confessional shorthand of "the ancient creeds." For the sake of demonstrating the use of the creeds confessionally, controversially, and pastorally, I will demonstrate similarities and differences via three cases. The Gallican Confession (1559) was affirmed and deployed at the Synod of Charenton (1645) both to address the complaints of a king and for the development of new forms for those professing their faith. The creeds as mentioned in article 9 of the Belgic Confession (1561) functioned in the lead up to various debates at the Synod of Dort (1619) polemically against Remonstrants, Socinians, and specifically against Vorstius. Article 8 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1571) has an interesting but debated reception in the early days of the Westminster Assembly (July 1–August 25, 1643), when the goal of the Assembly was still a revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles and not the drafting of new confessional standards. Reformed synods and confessions between 1537–1645 employed ancient creeds as strategic instruments to defend their commitment to Scripture and historic creedal orthodoxy and catholicity.

Among the French Reformed

It is beyond dispute that Calvin and his circle of pastors in Geneva left indelible marks upon the confessional development and structure of the

French Reformed Church. In the 1537 trinitarian controversy between Pierre Caroli (1480–1550) on one side and the Genevan ministers, Guillaume Farel, Pierre Viret, and Jean Calvin on the other, it caused no little stir when Calvin refused to play into Caroli's ecclesio-political stunt demanding the Genevan ministers subscribe to the ancient Creeds of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian. While it has been documented in various ways in the scholarship how Calvin simultaneously subscribed to the ancient creeds and yet refused to be bullied ecclesiastically with them,[1] it is quite noteworthy that Calvin in conjunction with his circle did not miss the opportunity to affirm these three creeds on at least three occasions, indicating in some measure that the charge in 1537 of departure from the ancient creeds was still a perceived weakness over twenty years later.

Two instances bracket the 1559 development of the Gallican Confession. In the first instance in 1557, Calvin was consulted by the congregation of Paris for the preparation of a brief confession addressed to the king. With respect to the ancient creeds, Calvin states without specification as to which creeds:

> In the first place we believe in one God of simple essence, and yet in whom there are three distinct persons according to what we are taught by Holy Scripture and as it has been determined by the ancient councils, and we detest all sects and heresies against which the ancient doctors have fought.[2]

In the second instance, Calvin composed another brief confession of faith on behalf of the French churches addressed to Emperor Maximillian and the Diet at Frankfurt in 1562, the point and priority of authorities are the same but their rhetorical order has been reversed. Calvin stated:

> In the first place, we protest that in all the articles that have been decided by the ancient Councils, touching the infinite spiritual essence of God, and the distinction of the three persons, and the union of the two natures in our Lord Jesus Christ: we receive and agree with what has been resolved therein, as being drawn from holy Scripture, upon which alone our faith must be founded: as there is no other witness proper and suitable to resolve for us what is the Majesty of God than himself.[3]

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1 R. Giselbrecht, "Trinitarian Controversies" in R. W. Holder (ed.), *John Calvin in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 278–86; J. V. Fesko, "Creedal Critics or Creedal Confessors? The Reformers and the Reformed Scholastics" in M. Barret (ed.), *On Classical Trinitarianism, Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2024), 158–60.

2 Jean Calvin, *Calvini Opera* (1870), 9:715–16.

3 Jean Calvin, *Calvini Opera* (1870), 9:755–56.

Calvin, Farel, and Viret's strategic response to Caroli's 1537 challenge established a pattern that other Reformed churches would deploy when facing accusations of heterodoxy. While maintaining the right of churches to frame their own confessional standards, the Genevan ministers developed a deliberately constructive approach affirming creedal orthodoxy on their own terms to preempt charges of doctrinal innovation or departure. Calvin's 1557 confession on behalf of the Parisian church, the original 1559 Gallican Confession by Calvin's delegates and pupil Antoine de le Chandieu (1534–1591), and Calvin's 1562 confession on behalf of the French Reformed Church all demonstrate this same strategic emphasis. The Gallican Confession was adopted by the Synod of Paris in 1559.[4]

In the 1560 introductory letter addressed to King Francis II prefacing the confession, the ministers of the French Reformed Church pled their case for the reformation of the Roman Church as well as their alignment with the primitive, apostolic, and ancient Church. Here they articulate their allegiance to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as well as profess the catholicity of the Reformed faith in which they lived and were prepared to die.

> Sire, we can protest that there is nothing [here] which contradicts the Word of God, nor which contravenes the homage we owe you. For the articles of our Faith which are described at sufficient length in our Confession, all return to this point: that since God has sufficiently declared his will through his prophets and apostles, and even through the mouth of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, we owe this honor and reverence to the Word of God, to add nothing of our own to it, but to conform ourselves entirely to the rule which is prescribed to us therein. And because the Roman Church, abandoning the usage and custom of the primitive Church, has introduced new commandments and a new form of the service of God, we consider it very reasonable to prefer the commandments of God, who is truth itself, to the commandments of men, who by their nature are inclined to falsehood and vanity. And although our adversaries bring accusations against us, we can declare before God and men that we suffer for no other reason than to maintain that our Lord Jesus Christ is our sole Savior and Redeemer, and his teaching the sole doctrine of life and salvation. And this is the sole cause, Sire, for which the executioners have so many times had their hands stained with the blood of your poor subjects, who do not spare their lives to maintain this same confession of Faith, and have been able to make it understood by all that they

[4] For an early exemplar printed in 1561, see Église Réformée de France, *Confession de Foy Faitte d'un common accord par les Francois, qui desirent viure selon la pureté de l'Evangile de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ* (1561), BnF D2-4234 (2), http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb33809182s.

> were driven by a spirit other than that of men, who by nature have more concern for their ease and comfort than for the honor and glory of God.[5]

In terms of rhetorical strategy, the French Reformed balance the homage they owe their earthly sovereign with the ultimate loyalty they have towards God. Second, the emphasis on how the Roman Catholics had abandoned the usage and custom of the primitive Church situates the Reformed as the conservative restorationists, not iconoclastic innovators. This rhetorical reversal forces Rome to defend against charges of innovation while positioning Reformed churches as the orthodox. Third, by referencing their suffering to the point of blood, the letter alludes to the saintly character of an apostolic and ancient martyr, implicitly contrasting the divine inspiration of their motives as opposed to merely human motivations. The emphasis on Christ as the sole savior and redeemer and his teaching the sole doctrine, clearly demonstrates the integration of *solus Christus* and *sola Scriptura* themes. This rhetorical framework—balancing scriptural authority with claims to primitive orthodoxy—would become the template for French Reformed creedal strategy. When the confession underwent revision in 1571 at La Rochelle under Theodore Beza's moderation, these same principles guided their explicit endorsement of ancient creeds as subordinate standards. The influence of Calvin and Geneva upon the authorship and reception of the Gallican Confession is clear.

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[5] *Confession de Foy* (1561), fols. A2v–A3r, "Sire, nous pouvons protester qu'il n'y a aucune chose qui repugne à la parole de Dieu, ne qui contrevienne à l'hommage que nous vous deuons. Car les articles de nostre Foy qui sont descrits assez au long en nostre Confession, reuiennent tous à ce poinct, que puisque Dieu nous a suffisamment declaré sa volonté par ses Prophetes & Apostres, & mesmes par la bouche de son fils nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ nous deuons cet honneur & reuerence à la parole de Dieu, de n'y rien adjouste du nostre: mais de nous conformer entierement à la regle qui nous y est prescrite. Et pour ce que l'Eglise Romaine, laissant l'usage & coustume de la primitiue Eglise, a introduit nouueaux commandemens & nouuelle forme du seruice de Dieu: nous estimons estre tres-raisonnable de preferer les commandemens de Dieu, qui est la verité mesme, aux commandemens des hommes: qui de leur nature sont enclins à mensonge & vanité. Et quoy que noz aduersaires pretendent à l'encontre de nous, si pouuons nous dire deuant Dieu & les hommes, que nous ne souffrons pour autre raison que pour maintenir nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ estre nostre seul Sauueur & Redempteur, & sa doctrine seule doctrine de vie & de salut. Et cette est la seule cause, Sire, pour laquelle les bourreaux ont eu tant de fois les mains souillées du sang de voz poures suiets, lesquels n'epargnent point leurs vies pour maintenir cette mesme confession de Foy, ont bien peu faire entendre à tous qu'ils estoyent poussez d'autre esprit que de celuy des hommes, qui naturellement ont plus de soucy de leur repos & commodité, que de l'honneur & gloire de Dieu."

After asserting the authority of Scripture as proceeding from God and containing all that is necessary for the worship of God and our salvation, the relevant passage in article 5 specifies more clearly than Calvin's 1557 confession or the 1562 confession:

> "… From this it follows that neither the antiquity, the customs, their number, human wisdom, the judgments, the proclamations, edicts, decrees, councils, visions, nor miracles ought to be opposed to this Holy Scripture but on the contrary, all things should be examined, ruled, and reformed according to them. And therefore, we confess the three creeds, that is, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God."[6]

The 1559 Gallican Confession of Faith followed a common strategy among the early modern Reformed when defending their orthodoxy and catholicity to Roman Catholic civil authorities. In this way, the French Reformed argued for the legitimacy of their faith both in terms of orthodoxy and legality, appealing to ancient Christian creeds and the common legal heritage of Europe back to the Justinian Code. This dual approach would be repeatedly deployed in response to royal edicts and declarations from 1561 through 1685.

Numerous examples appear throughout the records of the national synods of the French Reformed Church in the early modern period.[7] Royal commissioners to the national synods of the French Reformed Church frequently charged them with departing from the agreements and especially with changing their confessions, and thus the crown consistently alleged that the French Reformed were straining if not breaking the terms of the religious settlement.

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6 *Confession de Foi* (1559), art. 5, "D'où il s'ensuit que ni l'antiquité, ni les coutumes, ni la multitude, ni la sagesse humaine, ni les jugements, ni les arrêts, ni les édits, ni les décrets, ni les conciles, ni les visions, ni les miracles, ne doivent être opposés à cette Ecriture sainte, mais, au contraire, toutes choses doivent être examinées, réglées et réformées selon elle. Et suivant cela, nous avouons les trois symboles, savoir: des Apôtres, de Nicée, et d'Athanase, parce qu'ils sont conformes à la parole de Dieu." *Harmonia Confessionum Fidei* (Geneva: 1581), 11. Cf. P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 3:362; A. Goudriaan, "Reformed Theology and the Church Fathers" in *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*, eds. M. Allen and S. Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

7 E.g. the Synod of Alanson (1637), "It being most necessary that both they [pastors and professors], their scholars, and flocks should keep themselves to the simplicity and plainness of the Holy Scriptures, and to the common exposition of the Orthodox Creed grounded thereupon, and approved by the National Synods, particularly by that of Charenton, held in the year 1623." Quick, *Synodicon*, 2:349.

The Synod of Charenton (1645) reveals the comprehensive strategic value of ancient creeds for Reformed churches—they function simultaneously as external apologetic defenses and also as an internal regulatory instrument in the life of the Church. For a particularly clear example of the apologetic defense, consider the twenty-eighth National Synod, the third at Charenton (1644–1645). The moderator responded to a litany of royal grievances presented by King Louis XIV's commissioner to that body with respect to many matters political and religious, but at one point specifically against the Gallican Confession claiming departure from the received Christian creeds. With respect to their confession of faith, the moderator reminded the royal commissioner not only of the content of their confession but also that it has been protected by law for some time:

> We most humbly beseech their majesties, to take it into their royal consideration that our confession of faith was framed about an hundred years ago, before any edict was granted in favor of our religion, and was presented by them unto Francis II, who then reigned, to give his Majesty a reason of their hope, and account of those corruptions which they firmly believed to be in that Faith professed and retained by the Church of Rome, and that therefore it needed reformation: insomuch as none of our French Protestants did at first, nor can they now without being guilty of gross prevarication, change that form of expression, which hath from its very beginning been inserted into our confession whereby to declare sincerely and in truth their common belief authorized in the year 1561, by the Edict of January, and confirmed by the late king and his majesty now reigning.[8]

Furthermore, the moderator appeals to the common confession of the Reformed and the Roman Catholic churches with respect to the creeds. The royal commissioner alleged that the Reformed denounce the Roman Catholic creed as an abuse and deceit of Satan. In this instance, the moderator uses the term "creed" as a general shorthand for the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

> The whole Roman Catholic Creed was never, nor can ever be truly qualified an abuse and deceit of Satan, seeing that both the Church of Rome and the [French] Protestants have no difference about the Doctrine of the Trinity and of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus, which are the principal points of Christianity; yet together with these fundamental truths, and owned by all Christians in France, Germany, and elsewhere, there have been diverse other articles of Faith brought into the Romish Creed, to which we cannot

[8] John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata* (London: J. Richardson and J. Robinson, 1692), 2:434–35.

> yield any assent or consent; such are those of the Intercession of the Saints, Purgatory, of the pope, and sundry others, which though they have been in vogue in that church for many ages, have notwithstanding been constantly opposed and contradicted by all Protestants, both in France and other countries. So that would we abandon the profession of our faith permitted us by the Edict, and that confession we have made and declared of it with all imaginable sincerity and truth in the presence of God, who searches our hearts, and cannot endure hypocrisy nor an evil conscience, we should render ourselves guilty of a most inexcusable imposture; we should dissemble and counterfeit in religion, and utterly ruin all our hopes of heaven and everlasting life by means of a sacrilegious profession not in the least believed by us.[9]

The moderator's careful distinction reveals the precise strategic value of ancient creeds for Reformed apologetics in this period. By affirming shared commitment to Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy, while rejecting Tridentine additions, the French Reformed position themselves as defenders of authentic and ancient catholicity against papal innovations. The French Reformed qualified their agreement with the Roman Catholic Creed for specific theological reasons. The specific mention of the intercession of saints, purgatory, and the pope is not a cursory aside, but appears to be a reference to the Tridentine Creed promulgated in 1563 by Pope Pius IV. The Tridentine Creed begins with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed but then defines the true catholic faith further outside of which no one can be saved as comprising all apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions, observances, and constitutions of the Church; the Holy Scripture "according to that sense which our holy mother the Church held and does hold"; the seven sacraments of the New Law; the Council of Trent regarding original sin and justification; the Mass as a proper and propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead; purgatory; images of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints with their veneration; indulgences; and obedience to the bishop of Rome. It is precisely here where the Reformed resort to royal precedence from 1561 through the Edict of Nantes (1598) and various affirmations and acceptances by all the kings since to defend their apostolic and ancient catholicity as opposed to the Tridentine creedal innovations of the sixteenth century. This exchange at Charenton demonstrates the mature application of the strategy first developed by Calvin, Farel, and Viret in response to Caroli—deploying ancient creeds to legitimize Reformed orthodoxy while delegitimizing opponents as the theological innovators.

[9] Quick, *Synodicon*, 2:435.

The three creeds functioned as internal regulatory instruments with their inclusion in the forms of vows taken by those converting to Christianity and professing their faith publicly. The Nicene Creed functions within the aforementioned triad of the three creeds in article 5. Attached to the records and acts of the Synod of Charenton (1645), laid out like a catechism, there is "The Form and manner of baptizing pagans, Jews, Mahometans, and Anabaptists converted to the Christian Faith."[10] With respect to particular questions, for pagans, there must be affirmations that God is the creator of heaven and earth, one in essence distinguished into three persons equal and coeternal; and that God has always had a witness manifested and revealed to mankind by his works as well as by the divinely inspired Scriptures. For the convert from Judaism, the questions turn towards creedal summary. Consider this question:

> Do not you believe that Jesus the Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was conceived in her by the ineffable power of the Holy Ghost, and afterward condemned to the death of the cross, upon the malicious accusation of the Jews, by the unrighteous sentence of Pontius Pilate, and raised from the dead the third day, and now exalted in glory is God manifested in the flesh, the eternal Word of the Father, by whom he created and sustains the whole world, that blessed seed promised unto Adam immediately upon his Fall by whose power and virtue the head of that old serpent was bruised, whose coming in the flesh all the patriarchs believed and hoped for; that great prophet, and true Messiah foretold by Moses and all the prophets that lived after him?[11]

Here, there is a blend of points from the Scriptures, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. However, there is a distinct emphasis upon the protoevangelion as a messianic hermeneutic throughout the Old and New Testaments that is especially crucial for determining the conversion of a Jew to Christianity in the Reformed tradition. This formulation demonstrates how Reformed churches adapted ancient creedal content to address specific theological challenges. The emphasis on protoevangelion provides scriptural foundation while maintaining creedal structure—implementing the principle that creeds have authority precisely because they accord with Scripture. This approach exemplifies the versatile nature of the Reformed creedal strategy: the same scriptural subordination that deployed creeds against royal accusations also enabled their application in pastoral contexts.

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10 Quick, *Synodicon*, 2:447.

11 Quick, *Synodicon*, 4:448.

For the Muslim convert, the catechetical questions centered upon the Scriptures, the person and work of Christ, a denial of Muhammad, and an affirmation of the Gospel. With respect to a convert from Islam to Christianity, note the adaptation of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed:

> Do not you believe that Jesus the Son of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was conceived in her by the virtue of the Holy Ghost, and formed as to the flesh out of her own substance, is God and Man, blessed forevermore, perfect God, and perfect man; Man born of a Woman in due fulness of time, and God begotten of the Father from Everlasting?[12]

For the Anabaptist convert, the catechetical emphasis is on (1) Jesus as true God and true Man "in those two natures everlastingly," (2) infant baptism, (3) the authority of magistrates according to the ordinance of God, and (4) an affirmation of the sacraments as sealing and confirming the covenant of grace as propounded by the ministry of the Word. These are precisely the theological points at issue with the Anabaptist Schleitheim Confession (1527), which rejected infant baptism, the authority of magistrates, and Reformed sacramentology. In the case of pagan, Muslim, and Jewish converts to Christianity, the function of the creeds is clear, the minister would explicitly state: "Give an account of your Creed." At which point the convert must recite the Apostles' Creed.[13] With the Synod of Charenton (1645) the forms for profession of faith reveal that the same creedal authority that defended the Reformed orthodox against royal accusations also regulated the boundaries of conversion and membership, which created a unified system where apologetics and internal formation mutually reinforced Reformed identity.

The Creeds in the Belgic Confession (1561) at the Synod of Dordt (1619)

When we consider the Belgic Confession (1561) and its relationship to classic ancient creeds in general, but the Nicene Creed in particular, we see similar public affirmations regarding the creedal triad (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian) and their use as among the French Reformed.

The text of the Belgic Confession was originally composed in French primarily by Guy de Brès, but also with the assistance of de Saravia,

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12 Quick, *Synodicon*, 2:449.

13 Quick, *Synodicon*, 2:449, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of &c."

Modetus, Wingen and perhaps others in 1561.[14] It was adopted by the Reformed churches in the Low Countries at the Synods of Emden (1571), Dordt (provincial synod 1574, national synods 1578, 1619), Middleburg (1581), and The Hague (1586).[15] It was edited lightly by Franciscus Junius (1545–1602) for the Synod of Antwerp in 1580.[16] It passed into Latin through the *Harmonia Confessionum* (Geneva, 1581) of Beza and company, who had as their goal the unity of Reformed churches across Europe.[17] Later, the Belgic Confession appears again in Latin in the *Corpus et Syntagma Confessionum* (Geneva 1612), a work designed to show the agreement of Reformed confessions with the patristic witness.[18]

The translation of the Belgic Confession into Latin was published in the 1618 *Specimen Controversiarum Belgicarum* (and its Dutch translation in the same year), cataloguing theological controversies raised by the Remonstrants which appeared to undermine the Belgic Confession.[19] Festus

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[14] On de Saravia's attestation of assistance to Uytenbogard in 1612 (*Ego me illius confessionis ex primis unum fuisse auctoribus profieor, sicut et Hermannus Modetus …*), see P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:504n2; *La Confession de foi des églises réformées wallonnes et flamandes* (Brussels: Librairie Chrétienne Évangélique, 1833), vii n1.

[15] Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 175. cf. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:504–7.

[16] F. Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, trans. D. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 53, "At that time I sent the Confession of the Synod of the [sic] Belgian Churches, which had been held at the start of May, to the brothers in Geneva for review. Thus they might grant it their approval to be printed, if it seemed helpful, and to commit this undertaking of ours to God by their prayers."; idem, *Opera theologica* (Geneva: P. and J. Chouet, 1613), 1:17r. A. Thysius, Sr. *Leere ende order der Nederlansche* (Amsterdam: Pieter Pietersz, 1615), fol. **2v, "while a young man, but like a true Timothy, alongside his extraordinary learning, grave and earnest beyond his years."

[17] Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 175.

[18] J. F. Salvart, *Harmonia Confessionum fidei orthodoxarum et reformatorum Ecclesiarum* (Geneva: P. Santandreanus, 1581).

[19] Festius Hommius, *Specimen Controversiarum Belgicarum seu Confessio ecclesiarum reformatorum in Belgio, cujus singulis Articulis subjuncti sunt Articuli Discrepantes, in quibus nonnulli Ecclesiarum Belgicarum doctors hodie a recepta doctrina dissentire videntur. In usum futurae Synodi Nationalis Latine edidit, et colligit … Addita est in eundem usum Harmonia Synodorum Belgicarum* (Leiden: Elzevir, 1618); idem, *Monster vande Nederlantsche Verschillen ofte Belydenisse der Ghereformeerde Kercken in Nederlant. Al waer onder elcken Artijckel bygevoecht zijn de vershillende artyckelen inde welcek hedendaechs sommighe Leeraers der Nederlantsche kercken vande aenstaende Nationale Synode inde Latijnsche taele t'samen ghestelt ende uytghegheven … Alwaer tot den selvigen eynde bygedaen is d'overeenstemminghe der Nederlantsche Synode*, trans. J. Lodensteyn (Leiden: D. J. Van Ilyendam, 1618). For the Latin translation of the Belgic Confession in 1620, see *Corpus et Syntagma Confessionum*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: P.

Hommius (1576–1642), one of the scribes of the Synod of Dort, detailed the controverted points as raised by some of his colleagues in the Dutch Reformed Church. As the subtitle of Hommius's Latin text and Dutch translation indicates, the *Specimen* was prepared as a guide "for the use of the future national synod" to rally support for the Counter-Remonstrant cause against apparent deficiencies in the subscription of some Remonstrant-minded ministers. The goal of the Synod was in part to bring the French, Dutch, and Latin texts into alignment. Hommius remarked in his preface that

> I thought that it would be a useful endeavor for the whole Synod, if I were to publish evidence (*specimen*) of several controversies whereby our churches have been thus far disturbed such that [the international delegates] would know from it some part of the controversies that will be addressed especially in this Synod.[20]

But beyond the simple goal of international discussion and debate, Hommius connected the work of the Synod of Dordt and its international delegates expressly to the pattern of "prudent and revered antiquity" which produced public agreement on the formula of orthodox doctrine such as the Apostles' Creed, Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and others.[21] Furthermore, Hommius warned that there seemed to be an endeavor by the Remonstrants in their five articles to dress up and bejewel a latent Socinianism.[22]

As to creedal reception, Article 9 of the Belgic Confession explicitly summarizes the doctrine of the Trinity as understood by the Dutch Reformed churches with respect to the unity of the Godhead and the trinity of persons. Article 9 reads in a similar fashion as the French Reformed confessions with two expansions. The first specifies heresies and the second expansion, albeit a general one, accepts views of the patristic church fathers insofar as they are correct:

> This doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been defended and maintained by the true Church, since the times of the Apostles to this very day, against the Jews, Muslims, and some false Christians and heretics, such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosata, Arius, and others similar, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely that of the Apostles', of Nicaea,

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Chouet, 1654) and *Acta ofte handelinghen des Nationalen Synodi … tot Dordrecht* (Dordrecht: Isaack Iansz. Canin, 1621), *Acta Synodi Nationalis … Dordrechti Habitae* (Leiden: Isaak Elzevir, 1620), 299–318.

20 Hommius, *Specimen*, fol. **r. cf. N. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, 75n72.

21 Hommius, *Specimen*, fols. *2v–*3r.

22 Hommius, *Specimen*, fols. **2v.

> and of Athanasius; likewise that which, conformable to them, has been agreed upon by the ancient fathers.[23]

This formulation demonstrates the Dutch Reformed strategy of positioning ancient creeds as continuous with apostolic teaching while cataloguing specific heresies they oppose. Throughout Article 9, utilizing formulae and phrases from the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, Hommius lists only one contemporary challenger to this article specifically: the *Tract on the Duty of a Christian Man in the contemporary controversies regarding religion*.[24] Hommius did attribute the tract to Henricus Welsing, a Socinian sympathizing minister, but scholarship has argued it was in fact a pseudonymous work by Faustus Socinus.[25] The work had asserted "They may search the scriptures of the Gospel for as long as they want, but they will never find that dogma of the Trinity expressed in them."[26] To the Counter-Remonstrants, the consistent Remonstrant refusal to subscribe to man-made written formula seemed like an evasion in a Socinian direction. The Counter-Remonstrant concern was that Remonstrant refusal to subscribe to written confessions, while ostensibly defending Christian liberty, effectively opened the door to Socinian rationalism that denied foundational Christian doctrines.

With respect to the *Acta* of the Synod of Dort themselves, there are multiple instances in the records where the Remonstrants protested the authority of the Synod and also creeds in general. The fourteen Remonstrants attended the synod from its beginning on November 13, 1618 until they were ejected in session fifty-seven on January 14, 1619. The Synod continued without them until May 9, 1619 concluding after session one hundred fifty-four. Simon Episcopius (1583–1643) was the spokesman for the fourteen Remonstrants. His *Confession or Declaration of the views of ... the Remonstrants* is a defense of Remonstrant theology.[27] Confessional subscription to

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[23] Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:392–93.

[24] Faustus Socinus, *De Officio hominis Christiani in hodiernis istis de Religione controversiis ... Libellus ... ab anonymo quodano veritatis patrono conscriptus* (Irenopolis [Franeker]: typis Theophili Adamidis, 1610).

[25] E.g. A. Goudriaan, "The Synod of Dordt on Arminian Anthropology" in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt* (1618–1619), eds. A. Goudriaan and F. van Lieburg (Brill: Leiden), 82n6; A. de Groot, "Franeker als Irenopolis. F. Socinus, "De officio hominis Christiani," 1610" in *Kerk en conflict. Identiteitskwesties in de geschiedenis van het* Christendom, eds. W. Otten and W. J. van Asselt (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 102–14.

[26] Hommius, *Specimen,* 22.

[27] S. Episcopius, *Confessio sive Declaratio sententiae pastorum qui in Foederato Belgio Remonstrantes vocantur super praecipuis articulis Religionis Christianae* (Harderwijck: Theodore Daniel, 1622).

creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the face of internal doctrinal divisions was now at the forefront of Reformed confessional identity.

The Westminster Assembly and its reception of the Nicene Creed

In the midst of the First English Civil War (1642–1646), the Summoning Ordinance of June 1643 calling delegates to the Westminster Assembly observed that among the infinite blessings of Almighty God upon the nation, "none is, or can be, more dear unto us than the purity of our religion."[28] And therefore, many issues "in the Liturgy, Discipline, and Government of the Church, which do necessarily require a further and more perfect Reformation than as yet hath been attained."[29] Additionally, this Assembly would work "for the vindicating and clearing of the Doctrine of the Church of England and from all false calumnies and aspersions" by summoning learned, godly, and judicious divines "to consult and advise" on whatever matters were to be proposed to them by the Houses of Parliament jointly or separately. The Westminster Assembly was first premised and convened on July 1, 1643 as a consulting body for the correction and revision of the existing Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as well as the Book of Common Prayer and the canons of the Church of England. By August 22, 1643 the Assembly had reviewed and compiled suggested changes on articles one through ten of the 39 Articles. But on August 17, 1643 at Edinburgh to approve "The Solemn League and Covenant for Reformation and Defence of Religion" between the English and Scottish parliaments, dominated as they were by Puritans and Covenanters respectively, the remit of the Assembly evolved.

Prior to this point, however, there is an interesting space of time to consider between July 1 and August 22, 1643. Since the minutes of the Westminster Assembly are not complete for this timeframe, scholars must turn to other sources for a more fulsome account. Happily, there are two sources of especial note, the journal of John Lightfoot (1602–1675), a significant Hebraist and member of the Assembly, and the first two speeches in *Orationes Synodicae* of Daniel Featley, another assembly member who was the chaplain of Charles I of England, dissented from the Solemn League of Covenant, and eventually withdrew from the Assembly.[30]

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28 *An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons Assembled in Parliament* (1643).

29 "June 12 1643: An Ordinance for the Calling of an Assembly of Learned and Godly Divines" in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642–1660* (London, 1911), 180.

30 See the first and second speech in the tract Daniel Featley, *Orationes Synodicae, or several speeches delivered before this Assembly of Divines* appended to Daniel Featley,

Judging from the journals of John Lightfoot between July 1 and August 18, the Assembly considered articles one through eight of the Thirty-Nine Articles, with articles one through five and article eight handling the substance of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Article 8 read "The three creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius' Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed; for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture."[31] The debates around article 8 lasted one week, from August 18 through August 25. Lightfoot records that the three creeds were addressed on Friday, August 18:

> When we sat in Assembly, the three creeds were read, and many debates were held upon them, but especially about this word, in the eighth article, "they ought thoroughly to be received," as if it set them in too high a place, in an equality with Scripture. At last it was resolved, that the article should be tendered to the Parliament, by way of humble advice, to be read thus, "The Creeds that go under the Name of the Nice Creed, Athanasian Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, are thoroughly to be received and believed, for that the matter of them may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture." Then was there a long agitation about translating the creeds anew, and about setting some gloss upon the preface and conclusion of Athanasius's Creed, which seems to be something harsh; but at last it was concluded, that the creeds should be printed, at the end of the thirty-nine articles; so the determining of these matters referred thither.[32]

The addition of the phrase "for the matter of them," that is, their substance may be proved, but the specific wording of them created some debate. Did this require subscription to the specific words with a specific meaning or was it acceptable for some phrases to have a spectrum of acceptable meanings?

Lightfoot's journals help us understand how contested these points were, and how the matters were received and resolved, if at all. He informs us that on August 18, "then there was a long agitation about translating

The Dippers dipt, or the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Ears at a Disputation in Southwark ... The fifth edition augmented with 1. Severall Speeches delivered before this Assembly of Divines ... (London: printed for N. B. and Richard Royston at the Angel in Ivy-Lane, 1647), 187–92.

31 1571 Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, article 8.

32 "Friday, Aug. 18, [1643]" John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot* (London: J. F. Dove, 1824), 13:10; cf. idem, *John Lightfoot's Journals of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. C. Van Dixhoorn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 59–60.

the Creeds anew ... but at last it was concluded that the Creeds should be printed at the end of the 39 Articles, and the determining of these matters referred thither."[33] On Tuesday, August 22, "This forenoone was taken up about some exceptions made by some against the 8th Article about the Creeds ... and that the aspersions should be prepared by the Committees as they go along, but not debated nor determined of by the Assembly till the 39 Articles be gone through by proofes."[34] On the manner of receiving creeds, Lightfoot notes on Thursday, August 24,

> "The assembly being set the business about the 8th Article fell into agitation againe, and was canvassed exceeding much and long. The exceptions that some tooke were these. That by our expression "they are thoroughly to be received" we ranked them in the same ranke with the Scriptures; that we put men to believe the forme of the Creeds as well as the matter, etc. And this indeed was that that stucke with the exceptors, they opposing the imposition of any forms. At the last the matter came to a vote, upon this question, whether it should be expressed, "we thoroughly receive the 3 Creeds," or the 3 Creeds are thoroughly to be received" and the latter was carried by divers voices."

According to Daniel Featley, exception was taken by some of the brothers due to three issues. First, there is the nominal imprecision of the titles of the creed. Second, there is the matter of how they are propounded (under penalty of damnation). Third, some object to instances of doctrinal vagueness, such as what is meant by the phrase *Deus de Deo* and what is meant by the descent of Christ into hell. As to the first issue, it was claimed by some that the titles of three creeds listed—the Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed, and the Apostles' Creed—were not precise enough in their titles. That is, the text said the Nicene Creed but it meant the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and likewise the Athanasian Creed and the Apostles' Creed were not composed by either Athanasius or the Apostles respectively. But to this objection, Featley replied,

> ... the Nicene Creed is in truth the Constantinopolitane ... Hereunto I answer, that though the entire Creed, which is read in our Churches, under the name of the Nicen[e], be found *totidem verbis* in the Constantinopolitane; yet it may be truly called the Nicen[e] because the greatest part of it is taken out of that of Nice.[35]

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33 Lightfoot, *Journals*, 60.
34 Lightfoot, *Journals*, 61.
35 Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 187.

With this verbal disagreement overcome, as to the second issue, the manner in which they are propounded ("upon penalty of damnation" and "ought to be thoroughly believed"), Featley responded in the first speech to this issue:

> It is understood of such as have capacity to understand it, and their consciences are convinced of the truth of it. To the latter, that thoroughly to believe it, signifies no more than throughout, and entirely, and that not for the authority of the Creeds themselves, but for the Scripture by which they are confirmed.[36]

And in the second speech he specified what is meant by "ought to be received" in this way:

> ... as I conceive [it], it may be thus justified. Whatsoever articles may be firmly and evidently proved out of Scripture ought to be received and believed (art. 6). But such are all the articles of these three Creeds, therefore [they are to be received and believed]. Those to whose office and function it belongs to declare and teach the people of God, what they may and ought to receive and believe may use this expression. But it appertains to the office of the Pastors of the Church, especially met at a synod for that end to teach the people of God what they ought to receive and believe, therefore [they ought to be received and believed].[37]

And here Featley transitioned to the heart of the matter, on what kind of faith ought these to be believed, human faith or divine faith? This is no little question. Were he to say on divine faith, then the problem is that the creed or confession has become equivalent to Scripture. However, were he to say human faith, then there is a problem that salvation is not dependent on divine revelation. Here is how Featley leaped the horns of this dilemma

> With what kind of faith, human or divine? I answer, at the first propounding of them, if we have nothing to say against them, *fide ecclesiastica*, or *humana*, by a human faith, or the faith of the Church, out of reverence to our mother the Church; but after we have examined them and compared them with [sic] Scriptures, then *fide divina*, by a divine faith: as the Samaritans at the first believed, *fide humana*, by a human faith, upon the relation of the woman, but afterwards when they heard Christ himself and saw his miracles, *fide divina*.[38]

[36] Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 188.
[37] Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 188.
[38] Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 192.

This satisfied the Assembly at the moment in the main it seems, but it did not answer the question fully whether saving faith was of a mixed nature or purely of divine faith. Those debates would come at a later date.

But then there was the more serious question of doctrinal vagueness, especially with respect to Christ's descent into hell and God of God. However, for the sake of space, only the question of God of God is considered here. How should believers understand the Latin phrase *Deus de Deo*, God of God? Here Featley offered the views of past Reformed theologians whose orthodoxy was unquestioned and provided a brilliant strategic allowance of creedal authority while maintaining scriptural supremacy. In the first speech, Featley remarked "… there can be no doubt at all of it, for the Sonne is of the Father, and therefore the Father and the Sonne being God, it must needs follow that Christ is God of God, neither will it hence follow, that the Deity of the Sonne is of the Deity of the Father."[39] Here Featley was aware of diversity among the Reformed and sought to maintain it:

> Yea but Calvin saith, Christ is *autotheos*, God of himselfe. The answer is easie, Christ is God of himself, *ratione essentiae*, [in relation to the essence], but God of God, *ratione personae* [in relation to the person]. And whereas it is objected, that if he be *Deus de Deo*, it must be either *per productionem essentiae* or *communicationem*, by the production or communication of the essence; though Beza, and other of our divines stick not at the latter phrase, yet it followeth not; for it is sufficient to prove him God of God, that his person is generated of the Father, at it is safer to say that he hath *communionem essentiam cum Patre*, than *communicatam*, rather common than communicated.[40]

That this did not settle the matter in debate, Featley rose and returned to this issue in his second speech on Article 8 in order to defend against a heretical claim that Christ was essentiated from the Father.

> That Christ is *Deus de Deo*, God of God, is thus clearly proved out of Scripture, whosoever is God and the Sonne of God, must needs be God of God; but Christ is God and the Sonne of God, therefore [he must needs be God of God.] … this will not follow no more than that Socrates is *essentiatus a Sophonisco*, but only that he is *genitus a Patre*, begotten of his father and so is *recipiens essentiam* or *habens essentiam communicatam a patre*, which manner of speech is approved by Beza: *filius est a patre per ineffabilem totius essentiae communicationem ab aeterno*, the Son is from the Father by an unspeakable communication of his whole essence from eternity … [quoting Simler] we doe not deny that the Son hath his essence from God the Father, but we deny that the essence is begotten, and

[39] Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 189.
[40] Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 189.

> why should we boggle at this phrase when our Lord himself acknowledgeth John 5:26 ... all things are given me of my Father? Neither doth this any way contradict Calvin his autotheos, God of himself, which form of expression though some Protestants as well as Papists have excepted against ... Let Saint Augustine be the umpire, and reconcile both, *Christus ad se Deus dicitur ad patrem filius;* Christ may be considered two ways, either absolutely, and so he is Deus ex se, God of himself as the Father is and the Holy Spirit, or relatively as *filius*, and so he is Deus de Deo, as he is the Son, so he is God of God.[41]

In these speeches Featley provided an avenue for reconciliation on the point without debating further. They would agree that Christ was not essentiated, but they would allow diversity as Beza and Calvin had done. Featley had made an excellent point about the limits of phrasing: one can never phrase something with such clarity that it could never be distorted:

> Yea but these phrases may be taken in an ill sense; and so may all the Articles of the Creed ... nay, so may the whole Scripture ... What then? Must we weed up all the flowers of Paradise because hereticks like spiders suck such juice out of them which they turn into poyson?[42]

On Friday, August 25 Lightfoot reported:

> The 8th Article was againe taken in hand, and the word "matter" in the latter clause inserted but a day or 2 before... and was taken out by vote againe. Then did some strive to have that word "matter" put in the beginning of the Article thus, "The matter of the 3 Creeds" &c. which when it could not be obtained, it was moved that the determination of this 8th Article shall be put off till all the 39 be finished. And so it was concluded, and the assembly adjourned til munday.[43]

On October 12, 1643, Parliament directed the Assembly to consider the proper form of discipline and liturgy in response to the Solemn League and Covenant. The drafting of the Westminster Standards began, and attention turned toward other matters.

Findings

Viewed from the perspective of the Caroli-Calvin incident in 1537, there is a way of seeing the Remonstrant position as an extension of Calvin's early

41 Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 190-91.
42 Featley, *The Dippers dipt*, 91.
43 Lightfoot, *Journal*, 62.

insistence that a regional church represented by its elders and ministers had the right to compose their own creeds, confessions, and catechisms in submission to the Scriptures. Viewed from this angle, the Counter-Remonstrant position regarding subscription and the utility of confessional subscription is more in alignment with Calvin's later position endorsing the ancient creeds as subordinate standards. This is not to suggest that Calvin's views were specifically determinative of the Remonstrant and Counter-Remonstrant positions. Here it is only observed that in the early days of the Reformed from the 1530s through the 1560s it is possible to find varied and evolving views and practices on subscription, sometimes within the same Reformed minister like Calvin. By 1557 we do have Calvin using the Caroli triad of Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. It is however suggestive that the Counter-Remonstrant position at Dort is in alignment with the reception of Calvin's later position and practice by the French, Dutch, and Anglican Reformed in their confessions and synods. Whereas the Remonstrants found themselves viewed as heretics in part because they disavowed the necessity of public confessions of faith. Simon Episcopius's *Apologia* for a Remonstrant confession is just that, a realization that in order to defend Remonstrant views, they should be written down.

With respect to the French Reformed we find the creeds even finding their way into forms for the profession of faith that were tailored to a particular person's non-Christian religious origin—pagan, Jew, Muslim—or origin in a professing Christian community that was out of accord with the Reformed tradition—Anabaptist as well as Roman Catholic. Further research could determine whether this was a widespread practice in the early modern period or unique to the French Reformed.

With respect to the Westminster Assembly, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the nature and content of subscription to the creeds, the debates regarding the substance and form of the creeds is an interesting one. Viewed from the lens of the Caroli-Calvin debate, the Puritans and Presbyterians were both intent on defending the right of the churches to define their own confessions and catechism and also a moderate interest in defending their adherence to "the matter" of the creeds rather than scrupulous adherence to the phrasing. Featley demonstrates an Anglican voice allowing multiple interpretations of a particular phrase; for example, there are multiple acceptable ways that "God of God" could be maintained. Those arrayed against Featley appear to believe that having phrases with multiple allowable views, while pragmatic, is not most desirable. It is also noteworthy that all sides at the Westminster Assembly did have some level of concern as to whether other Reformed communions would view them as aberrant even were they to endorse the matter but not the phrasing.

These cases demonstrate how the Reformed in the early modern period applied their doctrine of the primacy of Scripture to the reception of creedal orthodoxy. What mattered to them and what should matter to us now is whether and in what sense in good conscience and all sincerity one can profess, "because they are in accordance with the Word of God."

5. Nicaea and the Separation of the Christian Church From Its Jewish Roots

Thomas Schirrmacher

Letter as the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance to All Churches

To avoid any misunderstandings that I might question the doctrinal position on Christology of the Nicene Council, I would like to start with my statement on the Council of Nicaea published as Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, as it helps to put my criticism of Emperor Constantine's and the Council of Nicaea's relationship with the Jewish roots of Christianity, especially visible in its decision on the date of Easter, into perspective. I will start with the press release explaining the background of my statement.[1]

> The webinar "From Nicaea, Walking Together to Unity: the beginning of a new beginning," happened as the Christian world is preparing to celebrate in 2025 the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which brought together for the first time bishops representing the whole of Christendom. The webinar offered deep reflections on the Council of Nicaea and its enduring legacy for Christians today.
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> The opening addresses were given by His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, by the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay, by Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and by Archbishop Dr Thomas Schirrmacher, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance. The event was organized by the Pasqua Together 2025 (Easter Together 2025) initiative, which is calling for all churches to celebrate Easter on the same date, as currently Eastern and Western Christianity have different ways of calculating when Easter should fall.
>
> Schirrmacher particularly emphasized the complementarity of biblical teaching, which Nicaea had captured perfectly. ... However, Schirrmacher also spoke of critical aspects that should be examined more closely, namely

[1] I would like to thank Titus Vogt of Hamburg for his careful review of both the letter and the article at various stages of their research and development.

> Nicaea as the definitive moment of the separation of Christianity from Judeo-Christianity and Judaism[2]

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!

It is a joy and an honor for me to send greetings on behalf of the World Evangelical Alliance for your event as we prepare together for the 1700th anniversary of the decisions of the Council of Nicaea, which we will celebrate in 2025. We are called "Christians" because we believe that the world was created through Jesus Christ and salvation was achieved through Jesus Christ, as formulated at Nicaea. As such, we do not want to refer people to ourselves, but to Christ alone.

It is important for Evangelicals that all churches in every generation re-establish the doctrine formulated at Nicaea based on the original revelation, the Holy Scriptures, and make Nicaea alive among the people of God beyond those well educated in the history of theology. The written Word of God, poured out by the Holy Spirit through human authors, bears witness to the Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ, both in his original words and actions here on earth and in what the apostles and the first generation of the church received by revelation about Jesus Christ. These truths are established from the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, the words and life of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels, as well as the other books of the New Testament.

The bishops at Nicaea did something important far beyond Christology itself and its reference to the triune God, when achieving Christian unity on the basis of revelation in Jesus Christ and of the Holy Scriptures that testify to him. They did justice, in two ways, to the fact that revelation often appears to confront us as a paradox, for which I personally like to use the newer, less negative-sounding term "complementarity."

First complementarity: the Creator is the Redeemer. The Nicene Creed begins with the Creator as the heading for the history of redemption and does not separate the two central elements of the Christian faith, creation and redemption, but sees them together. One without the other is unthinkable; it is not the Christian faith.

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[2] "Schirrmacher Publishes His Greeting for the Upcoming Nicaea Anniversary – Bonn Profiles." https://bonn-profiles.net/bonner-querschnitte-162024-ausgabe-793/; see also "Pasqua Together 2025. Online Webinar. From Nicaea Walking Together to Unity. The Beginning of a New Beginning. – Interparliamentary Assembly On Orthodoxy." https://eiao.org/pasqua-together-2025-online-webinar-from-nicaea-walking-together-to-unity-the-beginning-of-a-new-beginning-2/; https://www.jc2033.world/images/PASQUA_Together_2025-Kolybari_meeting.pdf.

Second complementarity: Jesus Christ is both fully human from his conception in and birth through the Virgin Mary up to his death on the cross. But this man, who achieved redemption in obedience to his Father, is at the same time the eternal God, the Son of God, and the one through whom the world was created and for whom creation exists.

The Council of Nicaea did not try to make the mystery of revelation comprehensible in simple formulas or opt for one of the many options on the market that overemphasized one aspect over the other, or explain the whole matter with the terms of philosophical systems. They decided that the entire revelation about Jesus Christ, about creation and about redemption, as we have received it, is simultaneously true. It is not up to us humans to decide which part of the revelation makes sense to us and which does not, or to judge God in rational (and typically human), limited terms. We can only stand in adoration before the mystery that God himself has worked out, revealed in history, and which reveals the center and goal of all creation to this day beyond our rational abilities and our imagination.

That is why the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is both an occasion for joy and an incentive for Christian unity. Joy, because the churches of the world have remained one in the center of their faith despite all the turmoil of history. An incentive, because there are still issues where the paradox of revelation, the complementarity of the manifold revelation in Holy Scripture and through the Holy Spirit guiding his people, becomes an occasion to set one part against the other where they belong together. As Evangelicals, it is important to us to never close our ears when we are reminded by other churches that certain aspects of this revelation have been overlooked or downplayed. This is especially true for us coming out of the tradition of the Western churches, as we have to learn a lot from the churches of the Eastern traditions.

As the World Evangelical Alliance, we will dedicate a special evening to the Council of Nicaea at our General Assembly (held once every six years) in Dubai in fall 2025. On this occasion, we will publish our own commemorative book for mass distribution in many languages and will contribute a comprehensive anthology of research articles for international discussions, which Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (USA) will be responsible for compiling for us. [*Editors' note: Dr. Schirrmacher here refers to the present volume.*]

We will also examine critical aspects of the Council, such as the role it played in the final distancing from Judaism and from the Jewish-Christian community that still existed at the time, especially in the context of the separation of the date of Easter from the Jewish Passover date and the

establishment of Sunday as the only possible day for worship. There is still much research to be done here.

When the Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846, the aim was precisely to create a platform where all who believe in the triune God, who consider Jesus Christ to be the only Savior of the world, and who recognize this gospel from the Holy Scriptures, expressed by the Holy Spirit through a wide spectrum of human authors, could work together. In return, they were prepared to subordinate other important questions of faith as non-divisive. In my view, this was a direct application of the legacy of Nicaea.

The exclusion of Jewish-Christian leaders from the Council

By the time of the Council of Nicaea,[3] the Christian church had largely shifted from its Jewish roots to a Gentile leadership, especially after the Bar Kokhba revolt (135 AD), which marked the end of Jewish-Christian bishops in Jerusalem.

There is a scholarly consensus[4] by historians and theologians that the Council of Nicaea marked a definitive break between the Church and its Jewish origins, as well as between the Gentile Church and the remnants of Jewish-Christian churches, which represented the origins of the New Testament Church. The council is considered part of a larger movement to establish a non-Jewish identity for the church, which included the implementation of anti-Jewish legislation and practices. The Council also signaled the end of the connection between the Church and communities of converts from a Jewish background to the Christian faith.

Although further research would be welcome, it seems clear that bishops and churches with Jewish backgrounds were not present among the 300 bishops who met for the Council of Nicaea. This followed Constantine's policy in both practice and intent. This exclusion, then, was part of a broader effort to establish a distinct Gentile Christian identity.

Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah existed as a distinct group well into the fourth century and were recognized by Christian and

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3 See Reinhart Staats. *Das Glaubensbekenntnis von Nizäa-Konstantinopel: Historische und theologische Grundlagen. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft*: Darmstadt, 1996 and my review of it in *Evangelikale Missiologie* 13 (1997) 1: 27.

4 This essay was written using AI research, particularly "Perplexity." This research included searching databases of ancient texts and translating sections from German to English.

Jewish sources alike. The most obvious evidence of this is Jerome's letter to Augustine, dated 404 A.D.[5]

These communities followed the Law of Moses in part and observed Jewish traditions, and at the same time revered Yeshua as Messiah, distinguishing themselves from Gentile Christians. They were sometimes called Nazarenes. Church fathers writing about the history of the early church, such as Epiphanius, Jerome, and Augustine, wrote about these Jewish Yeshua-believers, noting their presence "throughout all the synagogues of the East"[6] and the ongoing debate about their status as Jews or Christians. Evidence suggests some Jewish Yeshua-believers continued to participate in Jewish communities and festivals even in the fourth and fifth centuries, as noted by John Chrysostom's sermons urging Christians to avoid synagogue attendance because of this overlap.

By this time, tensions between traditional Jews and Jewish Yeshua-believers, which existed in diverse forms, had deepened, with Jewish liturgy explicitly excluding these believers from synagogue life by the early second century,[7] but remnants remained for centuries after. The break from mainstream Judaism solidified due to theological and political rifts, but the existence of Jewish Yeshua-believers in the fourth century demonstrates that the boundaries were not absolute and persisted in some regions.

There is no question that we are missing in-depth research here. While there has been research on local situations and specific groups, an overall study providing an overview of the remnants of Jewish-Christian believers in the 3rd to 5th century A. D., including the wide range of groups from those still within synagogues to converts distancing themselves from their Jewish origins and different sects outside of both synagogues and churches, like the Ebionites, is missing.

Although there were still a few bishops of Jewish background in the early church, they obviously were not invited to participate in the council; at least they were not present. While there is no evidence of a specific

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5 "Jerome to Augustine (A. D. 404)," translated by J.G. Cunningham. from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102075.htm.

6 "Jerome to Augustine", paragraph 13.

7 The classic study about the Hebrew and Jewish sources of the liturgy of the Eucharist of the first three centuries AD has been provided by Catholic scholar Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1968) (several editions). For this point, see Alan F. Segal. *Two Powers in Heaven* (Baylor University Press: Waco, TX, 2013); Kenneth W. Howard. *Excommunicating the Faithful: Jewish Christianity in the Early Church* (GCRR Press: American, 2022).

order for exclusion, the absence, coupled with Constantine's views on the Jews and against intermingling Christian faith with Jewishness, makes it likely that they were excluded intentionally, not by chance. Yet again, this should be the topic of in-depth research.

Constantine and his hatred of Jews

Emperor Constantine (AD 272–337)[8] wrote to all bishops after the Council of Nicaea with the clear intent to separate Christianity from its Jewish roots. He explicitly stated that it was "improper to follow the custom of the Jews" and urged the church to "have nothing in common with the Jews, who are our adversaries." This rhetoric was not theological or Christian but from an enmity and extremely negative view of the Jews as people, which were prevalent at the time. The fact that those Jewish customs at least in part are in line with the Old and/or the New Testament is not worth mentioning. Constantine viewed Jews and Judaism with marked suspicion and hostility.[9] He codified laws that increasingly separated Christianity from its Jewish roots, describing Judaism as a "dangerous" and "abominable sect." and using terms such as "bloodstained" and "Lord-killers." He also accuses the Jewish nation of perjury and parricide, or killing their divine parent, Jesus. This marks a shift from his earlier, more neutral pagan stance to inheriting and reinforcing Christian hostility toward Jews. This anti-Jewish sentiment became official policy, with religious inequality enforced by law and pejorative language directed at Jews, setting a long-term precedent for anti-Semitism in Christian Europe.

Interaction with Jews was forbidden by Constantine's rulings, as was intermarriage with a Jew. Attending synagogues and Jewish festivals was severely punished. Constantine's anti-Jewish policies continued beyond

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[8] For my view of Constantine in general, which is quite positive in principle, see "Why Ethics Needs Accurate Church History: Reflections on Books on Constantine the Great," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 39 (2015) 1: 76-81; available under https://thomasschirrmacher.net/blog/neuere-bucher-uber-konstantin-den-grosen-von-leithart-and-girardet/; "Neuere Bücher über Konstantin den Großen". *Glauben und Denken heute* 5 (2012) 2: 51-54; "Defending Constantine". S. 318-323 in: Thomas Schirrmacher u. a. (Hg.). Märtyrer 2012: *Das Jahrbuch für Christenverfolgung heute*. Bonn: VKW, 2012.

[9] The two major works on Constantine and the Jews from two totally different perspectives are James Carroll. *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2001) and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987).

Nicaea, and subsequent councils further restricted Jewish rights and religious freedoms. The developments at Nicaea, especially the deliberate separation from Jewish customs and calendar, laid the theological and social foundations for what is often called "replacement theology", the belief that the Christian Church has fully replaced the Jews as God's chosen people, who in turn by not accepting this, have become enemies of God.

Even before the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Elvira (Spain) in c. 305 attempted to separate Jews and Christians by prohibiting the latter from sharing meals with Jews, marrying Jews, using Jews to bless their fields, or observing the Jewish Sabbath. These objectives remained constant for centuries. For instance, the prohibition of sharing meals with Jews was reiterated at the councils of Vannes (465), Épaon (517), Orléans III (538), and Mâcon (583). Mixed marriages were forbidden at the councils of Orléans II (533), Clermont (535), Orléans III (538), and Orléans IV (541).[10]

The letter of Constantine about the Jews after Nicaea is preserved in Eusebius's Life of Constantine (Vita Constantini), Book III, Section 18–20. In this document, Constantine addresses the Christian community regarding the calculation of Easter and refers to separating Christian practices from Jewish customs, often interpreted as expressing a very negative stance toward continued Jewish influence.

> When the question relative to the sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom [the calculation] of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom, we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter, which we have observed from the time of the Saviour's Passion to the present day [according to the day of the week]. We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course (the order of the days of the week); and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep this

[10] Texts and commentaries see in detail in Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld* (Frankfurt: Peter Lange, 1982); cf. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven.* Op. cit.

> feast. How can they be in the right, they who, after the death of the Saviour, have no longer been led by reason but by wild violence, as their delusion may urge them? They do not possess the truth in this Easter question; for, in their blindness and repugnance to all improvements, they frequently celebrate two passovers in the same year. We could not imitate those who are openly in error. How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are most certainly blinded by error? for to celebrate the passover twice in one year is totally inadmissible. But even if this were not so, it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people [the Jews]. Besides, consider well, that in such an important matter, and on a subject of such great solemnity, there ought not to be any division. Our Saviour has left us only one festal day of our redemption, that is to say, of his holy passion, and he desired [to establish] only one Catholic Church. Think, then, how unseemly it is, that on the same day some should be fasting whilst others are seated at a banquet; and that after Easter, some should be rejoicing at feasts, whilst others are still observing a strict fast. For this reason, a Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way; and everyone, I hope, will agree upon this point. As, on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord; and as, on the other, the custom now followed by the Churches of the West, of the South, and of the North, and by some of those of the East, is the most acceptable, it has appeared good to all; and I have been guarantee for your consent, that you would accept it with joy, as it is followed at Rome, in Africa, in all Italy, Egypt, Spain, Gaul, Britain, Libya, in all Achaia, and in the dioceses of Asia, of Pontus, and Cilicia.[11]

The letter shows how Constantine's negative view of Jews and the question of the date of Easter were intertwined, even though, from a biblical-theological perspective, they are unrelated. The records offer no indication that any of the 300 bishops present, or any church fathers or bishops after the Council, questioned this kind of argument. This argument sets aside any discussion about how to correctly understand Scripture. This is all the more astonishing given that the correct interpretation of Scripture played a central role in combating Arianism and defending the high Christology of the Nicene Creed.

Constantine and the Sunday

In March 321, Constantine promulgated his famous edict: "On the venerable Day of the Sun let the magistrates and people residing in cities rest, and

[11] "From the Letter of the Emperor to all those not present at the Council". https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.x.html.

let all workshops be closed."[12] This decree made Sunday ("dies Solis") an official day of rest for civic and urban life, associating it with both Christian worship and previous Roman tradition. The edict does not mention the Jewish Sabbath or forbid its observance. However, Constantine and later church leaders promoted Sunday worship and discouraged Jewish customs among Christians, contributing to the gradual decline of Sabbath observance in Christian practice.

This happened only four years before the Council of Nicaea, which dealt directly with religious dates and festivals of the Christian church in transition away from its Old Testament and Jewish background. Surely, it heavily influenced the debates on the Easter date at the Council of Nicaea. To my knowledge, no detailed research has been conducted yet on the extent to which Constantine's Sunday legislation and the date of Easter influenced each other.

The decisions by the Council concerning Easter and Jewish Passover

A central feature of the Council of Nicaea was separating the date of Easter from the Jewish Passover. In other words, the Jewish feast was banned as a negative Jewish custom and replaced with Easter as the best of all customs. This ruling did not only decide a specific question, but established a climate of a rigid legal and doctrinal divide between Christianity and Judaism. It formally eliminated remaining traces of Jewish influence in church life, paving the way for institutionalized Christian anti-Judaism in subsequent centuries.

The Synodal letter stated:

> And truly, in the first place, it seemed to everyone a most unworthy thing that we should follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this most holy solemnity (Passover), who, polluted wretches, having stained their hands with a nefarious crime, are justly blinded in their minds ... It is fit, therefore, that rejecting the practice of this people, we should perpetuate to all future ages the celebration of this rite, in a more legitimate order... Let us then have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews.[13]

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[12] A solid selection of Constantine's Sunday laws has been conveniently compiled in a Seventh Day Adventist website: https://text.egwwritings.org/read/951.1109.

[13] *First Council of Nicaea*, translated by J.G. Cunningham. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 14. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1900.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3801.htm.

Shockingly, the reason for the change in the date of Easter was not grounded in theology, Scripture, or early church tradition. Rather, it was based on an extremely negative view of the Jews, reflecting the negative views known from the Egyptian tradition, especially since Manetho, and from Roman authors who saw Jews as hating all of mankind.[14] Jewish customs were considered "a most unworthy thing," and Jews were described as "polluted wretches who have stained their hands with a nefarious crime and are justly blinded in their minds." The result is: "Let us have nothing in common with the most hostile rabble of the Jews."

But let's focus on the matter of the date of Easter itself. Even though the date of Easter was not practiced uniformly everywhere, it was quite predominantly celebrated in the East of the Church on the 15th of Nissan of the Jewish calendar, the beginning of Passover. The council de facto laid down only two simple rules for Easter that nevertheless spoke directly against the practice in the East: 1) independence from the Jewish calendar, and 2) worldwide uniformity. No details regarding the computation were specified in the official statement that survived. The details were determined through a process that took centuries and generated numerous controversies, some of which remain unresolved. Notably, the council did not seem to decree that Easter must fall on Sunday.

This change clearly separated Easter from the Jewish calculation of Passover, ensuring that it would always be celebrated independently of the Jewish calendar while maintaining a vague connection to the season of the year. The Council's decision also eliminated the need for Christians to rely on Jewish communities to determine the date, allowing them to use astronomical data related to the equinox and moon phases for calculation instead.

The separation of the date of Easter from the date of Passover was the most obvious sign, but de facto Easter was also stripped of most, if not all, Jewish elements beyond the pure date. A few exceptions survived the future developments, like bread and wine, as well as the New Testament wording of the Eucharistic Words of Institution from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.[15]

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[14] See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), Ch. 1 "The Ancient World: Egypt, Exodus, Empire," and Menachem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*. 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974), which includes Egyptian sources at the beginning of the book; see also https://jcpa.org/article/the-egyptian-beginning-of-anti-semitism's-long-history/.

[15] For the history of those words see Darwell Stone, *A History of the Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909); and Helmut Hoping, *My Body Given for You: History and Theology of the Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019).

For those participating in Easter or the Lord's Supper today, it may be hard to grasp that these celebrations are deeply rooted in first-century Jewish ceremonies and symbols, as well as in God's history with Israel as recorded in the Old Testament. Those who merely participate in these celebrations may not realize that their meaning, symbolism, and significance cannot be understood apart from their backgrounds in the Old Testament, the four Gospels, and first-century Judaism.

Of course, we cannot discuss the ethics of Christian festivals and the holy calendar here.[16] The relationship of the Sabbath in the Old Testament to the New Testament church, and whether the Sabbath commandment of the Ten Commandments is still binding, are questions that would require an extra book to address, as I have attempted it in my moral theology.[17] The same goes for the question of whether the Church today can be bound by any global ruling concerning days of worship, festivals, and a church calendar.

However, it is clear that the decisions made by the Council of Nicaea regarding the date of Easter and the relationship of the Eucharist to Passover were not the result of exegetical and biblical hermeneutical discussions. Rather, they were the result of clear-cut political motivations stemming from outside influences. These decisions clearly separated Christian practices from their Old Testament and Jewish backgrounds.[18] They established Christian positions that were rooted in legal decisions by the Council and the Roman state.

Neglect of the Jewishness of Jesus

Beyond those specific topics, the anti-Jewish stand of the Council of Nicaea and of Constantine's politics is the background to understand why Jesus's

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16 From a Protestant perspective see Peter Archer, *The Christian Calendar and the Gregorian Reform* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

17 Thomas Schirrmacher. *Ethik*, 6 volumes. Vol. 4: 149-2000 = chapter 38. Nürnberg: VTR, 2009, 4th edition (chapter 38 in all other editions from 1994 – 2021); cf. Richard J. Bauckham, *Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition*. S. 311-341 in: D. A. Carson (Hg.). *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971).

18 The most detailed explanation on the basis of the newest research of Jewish festivals and customs in the first century, which served as the backdrop for the Eucharist and its establishment in the days before the crucifixion, has yet to be translated from German into English: Giodo Baltes, *Die verborgene Theologie der Evangelien: Die jüdischen Feste als Schlüssel zur Botschaft Jesu* (Marburg: Francke, 2020).

Jewishness is practically absent from the Christology of Nicaea. Most Jewish titles for Jesus, that stem from the Old Testament, are not used in the Nicene Creed or at least play a very minor role compared to other terms and titles. Jesus is not described as a member of the Jewish nation or as heir of David or as the King of the Jews. The history between God and Israel is not mentioned.

The Council did avoid specifically Jewish titles or expressions for Jesus. No one has proven this in detail better than Jewish author Geza Vermes.[19] The Council does not mention the New Testament view, that Jesus Christ is the very fulfillment of Old Testament law and prophecy. Instead of Jewish terminology, the Council employed more technical, non-Jewish theological language to describe Jesus' divine nature. This use of extra-biblical terminology was purposefully chosen to unify the Church's faith statement amid internal doctrinal disputes and to assert the divinity of Jesus in precise terms rather than relying solely on scriptural titles, some of which had distinctly Jewish roots. I am not questioning whether this is permissible, whether the dogma using this wording is wrong, or whether it automatically leads to an incorrect result. I just would like to point out that avoiding Jewish titles for Jesus, and much of the wording in the Old and New Testaments, is consistent with the result of the Council and Constantine separating the Christian Church from its Jewish roots.

Epilogue: The High Christology of Nicaea Goes Back to Jesus Himself

For a long time, I have argued—in line with several Church Fathers I studied—that the high Christology of the Nicene Creed and subsequent creeds actually goes back to Jesus himself, as well as to how his first followers understood him.[20] They saw the Trinitarian nature of the Messiah, including his deity, in the Old Testament discussions between God, the Messiah, and the Spirit of God. Many central quotes from the Old Testament in the New Testament prove this.

The oldest Christian sermon on the day of the founding of the Church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:34-36) makes this amply clear by using

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[19] Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings from Nazareth to Nicea, AD 30-325* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); cf. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

[20] Thomas Schirrmacher, *Christ and the Trinity in the Old Testament* (Hamburg: RVB International, 2013; German original: *Christus und die Dreieinigkeit im Alten Testament* (Hamburg: RVB, 2001).

Psalm 110:1 as its base. Peter sees the psalm as reporting a talk between the persons of the Trinity. This is true wherever Psalm 110 is quoted in the New Testament (Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42–43; Acts 2:34–35; Hebrews 1:13; Hebrews 10:13). In John 12:41, John reports about Jesus equating himself with the God Isaiah saw on his throne in Isaiah 6:1ff. John 12:44 sees Isa. 48:16 as a discussion between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Meanwhile, Matthew Bates has studied the origin of the Church Fathers' high Christology from a historical perspective.[21] He compares and refutes the different views and time frames from which the high Christology of the fourth century AD emerged. He then argues that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged not as a late philosophical development, but from how early Christians (including New Testament authors and church fathers) read the Old Testament, especially through a technique called "prosopological" exegesis. This reading method involves assigning speech in biblical texts to divine persons dialoguing—Father, Son, and Spirit—which revealed a relational interior life among them.

Bates contends that early believers recognized three distinct persons in the Godhead by interpreting Old Testament dialogues as conversations between the Father, Son, and Spirit. This approach was present in Christian writings well before the Council of Nicaea, challenging ideas that Trinitarian doctrine was a result of later Greek philosophical influence. Examples include Psalms (such as 2, 22, 110) and passages in Isaiah, where early Christians understood conversations and missions of Christ—before creation, during his earthly ministry, his death, and his final exaltation—as expressions of inner-Trinitarian life

Chapters 2-6 of Bates' book examine specific biblical passages interpreted as divine dialogues: creation (Genesis 1:26, Psalm 2, Isaiah 42), Christ's mission (Psalm 40, Isaiah 61), crucifixion (Psalm 22), and resurrection/exaltation (Psalm 110, Psalm 45). Bates traces how this hermeneutic persists through the early church fathers (e.g., Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian). He highlights how Tertullian and Justin Martyr employed a person-centered, dialogical reading strategy of the Old Testament that reflects and supports the idea of the Trinity. They interpreted Old Testament passages as evidencing divine dialogue among the Father, Son, and Spirit, which serves as a major early testimony to the Trinitarian understanding of God.

The presence of divine dialogue in the New Testament and early Christian literature indicates that the earliest Christology was the most exalted,

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[21] Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

as Jesus was identified as a divine being through interpretations of the Old Testament. If this were true, it would mean that the Council of Nicaea adhered to the finest traditions of the Old and New Testaments in its Christology. However, it avoided Jewish language and attempted to distance the central Christian holiday, Easter, from its historical roots in God's history with Israel.

Part Two: Confessing the Creed As, With, and For the Church

6. The Father: The Doctrine of Creation and the Crisis of Trust

Mark A. Garcia

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, of all things visible and invisible."

Lack Means Risk: Divine Plenitude and the Crisis of Trust

In Voltaire's "Story of a Good Brahmin," a traveling narrator meets a very wise and educated man.[1] He is clearly struck by the man's intellect. This man is easily persuaded of philosophy's importance. He lives as a curious, inquisitive sort, ruminating on the meaning of things, even of questions themselves.

The traveler then encounters an old woman who never gives a thought to thought. Despite this, she contentedly lives her life in the usual pragmatic way, undisturbed by rumination, and is apparently happy. To the alarm of the narrator, she is quite content never to have been troubled to ask how her soul was made.

Voltaire's story is a poignant, if surprising, defense of the lowly philosopher. On the one hand, the Brahmin is upset that so much time pondering the big questions has left him nowhere; on the other hand, he concludes he would not trade places with his happy but unreflective neighbor.

The narrator asks the Brahmin, "Are you not ashamed to be unhappy [or *miserable*] when at your very door there lives an old automaton who thinks about nothing, and yet lives contentedly?"

"'You are right,' he replied. 'I have told myself a hundred times that I should be happy if I were as brainless as my neighbor; and yet I do not desire such happiness.'"

Voltaire thus explores the complicated relationship between philosophical reflection on life and happiness in life. But the real genius of Voltaire's story, I suggest, may pertain to something other than the two types of people he presents. I am struck by something the famous deist and critic

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1 I will cite from "The Good Brahmin" in Ben Ray Redman, ed., *The Portable Voltaire* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1949), 436-8.

of Christianity "gives away" at the very outset of his tale. It's a passing remark, a truism, tucked into which is a profound invitation to reflect on how the Creed confesses God the Father.

Returning to the beginning of the story, we read Voltaire open with a glowing characterization of the impressive man who is philosophically inclined. His first lines read: "On my travels I met an old Brahmin, a very wise man, of marked intellect and great learning. Furthermore, he was rich and, consequently, all the wiser, because, lacking nothing, he needed to deceive nobody."

These first words of Voltaire's story are pungent with the stink of so much human trouble. We note the link in Voltaire's description: "[he was] all the wiser, because, lacking nothing, he needed to deceive nobody." Lacking nothing entails not needing to deceive. Having everything means being safe for others. They have no need to fear your potential deception. Voltaire's matter-of-fact remark is unintentionally sound theologically, but it also taps into a dark, universal human reality that dates back to Gen. 3:16 and the entrance of sin into human relations. The truth is, of course, that no human person truly has everything. We all lack something, *and so*, given our fall into sin, we deceive, manipulate, or harm others. We illicitly seize from others–money, objects, people, reputation, power–to compensate for what we believe we need and to remedy that need. And the very possibility of deceit, grounded in the presence of felt or real lack, compromises trust. This is the story of sin's bitter reign across the wide scope of the human race.

We may now set Voltaire's truism alongside the opening affirmation of the Nicene (and Apostles') Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." We often read or recite these words with a sense of joy and delight, but why do we believe it is good that God is an *Almighty* Father? In our day it is important that we not simply assume that the people sitting in church pews hear "almighty Father" and automatically think a good thing. We do not read very far in the pages of Scripture, after all, before we are reminded that there are awful fathers. We know all too well that many fathers, as sinners, use their power for ill rather than for good. The notion of an almighty father–a father without any limits whatsoever in power–might very well be a horrifying prospect for some in our midst, rather than a comforting one.

But we must hurry on to note that this is not all that the Creed says. We immediately go on to read that this almighty Father is the "Maker of Heaven and Earth." This additional affirmation is critical to the confession of this God, and it rescues us from the fear the opening words might have provoked. As the Maker of all things ("heaven and earth, visible and

invisible" functioning as all-inclusive merisms), this almighty Father-God is utterly unlike any other father. Everything outside himself is the result of his free decision to create. He needs nothing outside himself to be himself, and thus it is in his free and gratuitous love and delight that he has made what he is not, the heavens and the earth. Recalling Voltaire's quip, this means that the God of Christian faith, *lacking nothing*, uniquely and exclusively *does not need to deceive anybody* to acquire what he lacks. He lacks nothing. He is eternally the God he is, creation having added nothing to him. And having no intrinsic need, on Voltaire's reasoning, he alone can be trusted. Indeed, no creature could ever be trustworthy in the utterly thoroughgoing sense in which God the Creator is trustworthy, because every creature, by definition, is not the Creator. Every sinful human being since the Fall is liable to the temptation to deceive in order to acquire what he or she lacks. But not God the Father Almighty, for he is (also) the Creator of all things, and therefore needs nothing. This second line, "Maker of heaven and earth," thus grounds (in part) our confidence in the Creator's unique trustworthiness.

The Self-Existent Creator and Generative Father

Theologically, we capture this idea with the language that God is self-existent, self-reliant, self-contained, dependent on no one and nothing outside of himself in any way. Early Christian theological reasoning on the origin or beginning of things included pointed polemical engagements with opponents and heretics, including Greco-Roman ideas regarding a cosmos without beginnings. In the course of this polemic, Christian theology gained a deep appreciation of the importance of the Creator-creature distinction and the rich category of createdness itself. But it also included, as a parallel development, increasing clarity concerning what Paul Blowers has referred to as "the *arche* of creation within the larger scope of the divine *oikonomia*."[2] For early writers, the opening words of Genesis ("in the beginning") unfolded not only the narrow concerns of the origins of things but the entire vista of creation and redemption. Since the *arche* of Genesis 1:1 is the intersection of the eternal, timeless God and the temporality of the world, it requires careful speech and reflection on the relationship of *theologia* (the mystery of the Trinity) to *oikonomia* (the self-revelatory words and works of God in the cosmos and in salvation). The key challenge

[2] Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 184.

for early theologians was to preserve and explicate not only the fact of the eternity and absolute priority of God in relation to creation, but also the abiding, continuing reality of that absolute and eternal independence in the context of the event of creation. Early, opaque, and unsatisfying attempts to negotiate this relationship by way of a mediating Logos soon collapsed under the recognition that the Logos too is uncreated and gave way by the fourth century to reflection on the Father's generation of the Son who is the true *arche* of creation inasmuch as his incarnation (and all that he is and does as incarnate Son) disclosed and secured the ultimate purposes of creation and redemption.[3]

Alongside this effort to relate the timeless and eternal God to the temporality of creation, early theologians also gave great prominence to its twin theme, namely, creation *ex nihilo*. This, too, included a polemical aspect over against ancient cosmologies and cosmogonies of eternal matter (including their maxim "nothing comes from nothing"). But over time it also came to include a robust insistence on and elaboration of its necessary implication: the idea of God's radical independence. The Creator's infinite power was in fact evidenced in his absolute freedom, the freedom which in turn funds rich expositions of the fathomless divine *gratuity* evidenced by the very being of created things, things which by definition lack necessary existence. Blowers refers to the literary critic Terry Eagleton's interaction with Augustine: "the fact that human beings are 'created' means that their being is shot through with non-being. Like some modernist works of art, we are riddled from end to end with the scandal of our own non-necessity."[4] Herman Bavinck writes similarly, "While aseity only expresses God's self-sufficiency in his existence, independence has a broader sense and implies that God is independent in everything: in his existence, in his perfections, in his decrees, and in his works."[5]

Thus, simply to *be* is to enjoy divine favor. To exist is to be the object of divine interest. Nothing has to be but God, and yet we are. In his absolute freedom, he has graced creation with the integrity, the dignity, of being at all. For those who have in this God not only our Maker but the almighty Father, this Maker of heaven and earth is therefore alone wholly trustworthy. He has nothing by *nature* or *necessity* to gain from making us.

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3 Blowers, *Drama*, 184-6, summarizes the examples of early attempts found in Origen, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus, and Dionysius.

4 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 33; Blowers, *Drama*, 186.

5 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics vol. 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend (Baker, 2004), 152.

Doxology, Creaturehood, and Creatureliness

Properly distinguishing the Maker from the made brings into view the fundamental commitments of a Christian vision of created reality. These commitments can be summarized in terms of doxology, creaturehood, and creatureliness. Since all things that are not God are made by God for his own glory, *doxology* is the most fundamental dimension of all created reality. As the opening questions of the two Westminster Catechisms famously say, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Not only man specifically but all things generally that are not God are made for his glory, have their beginning and end in his glory, and are thus "bent" toward that glory throughout their location in time and space. Reality, in all its diverse harmony, is ultimately doxological, a central characteristic of all that partakes of creaturehood and creatureliness. *Creaturehood*, as a direct and simple way of speaking of existence as a creature rather than as Creator, refers to the status of being a creature. Since creation is contingent rather than necessary, creaturehood as existence is fundamentally and exhaustively a free, divine gift. *Creatureliness* brings into view the qualities and states of creaturehood, which include vulnerability in terms of fragility as well as a general condition of humility and dependence. These qualities and states establish and reflect a solidarity among all creatures, human and otherwise, inasmuch as these qualities and states pertain to creatures as such.

God the Father who Fathers-Forth

Our creaturehood, as a status, is a consequence of being made by the Father. The work done at the Council of Nicaea benefited from a great deal of work done in earlier generations on God the Father. Against the immediate threats posed by varieties of Gnosticism within and of paganism without, the Church had been able to work out sophisticated and enduringly valuable ways of understanding the one God who is Father and Maker of all things. To do so meant resisting considerable pressure on two sides: against Marcionites and Gnostics who favored some form of dualistic or emanationist syncretism with the default polytheisms of the era, and against Sabellians and subordinationists who pushed for a largely monistic and nontrinitarian model of God's unity on account of their great aversion to and fear of polytheism.[6] Nicaea represented an opportunity and a need

[6] Jared Ortiz and Daniel A. Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2024), 38-48.

to deepen the orthodox way of thinking and speaking in view of Arianism. Given the clarity and strength of the Church's grasp of the oneness of the true and living God, the Arian danger pressed Nicene theologians to articulate particularly how that one God is known and confessed as triune, and how this relates to the Son as equal with the Father yet distinct from him, all without compromise of God's oneness. This move is related to the way "Father *almighty*" (*Patrem omnipotentem* in Latin; *Patera pantocratora* in Greek) functions in the Creed's affirmation regarding the Father.

Interestingly, as others have noted, there are no instances in Holy Scripture of God being called "almighty" and "Father" together. However, God is often called almighty and often called Father.[7] One especially important way that God's might is spoken of is in terms of his generative power, and this is particularly relevant to the Father. But we must take care in this area on account of contemporary confusion over the naming of God as Father. Importantly, God is named the Father not because he is male but because he is the Begetter who eternally generates the Son (and is thus Father).

Similarly, God is named the Son because he is begotten and generated of the Father (and is thus the Son). The Son is the "only begotten Son from the Father" (John 1:14). God is a spirit, and does not have a body (John 4:24). Being without a body, he is without sex, however popular it might be in our time to detach sexual identity from embodiment. By *naming* himself Father rather than Mother, we learn he generates outside himself rather than within himself, inasmuch as this distinction establishes what is proper to being a man rather than a woman.[8] By attributing creation to the Father,

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[7] Ortiz and Keating (48-49) note that the closest we get to this conjunction is in 2 Cor. 6:18: "I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." What is particularly interesting about this example is that, while Paul includes this statement in a series of quotations from the Old Testament, there is no such statement in the Old Testament. It would appear this may be an example of the apostolic reading "between the lines" (of the Old Testament) theological move we have suggested elsewhere is characteristic of theology after (and on account of) the resurrection of Christ. See Garcia, "Confessing Between the Lines," chapter 2, above.

[8] According to Samuel Terrien, the reason the ancient Hebrews never called God "Mother" was that "they reacted against the allurement of the Mother Goddess cult because they somehow sensed the difference between true divinity and deified nature." According to Terrien, ancient mother goddess worship, unlike certain modern versions, was never about empowering or dignifying women. It was about glorifying a personified and deified Nature. It arose from a confusion of the divine with nature. See Terrien, *Till The Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 60.

we understand from the Creed that creation is not something that is *part of* God or that *arises from his being* ontologically. The woman receives from the man and produces life within herself, but God does not receive something from outside himself that makes him who he is: as the ultimate Origin of all things (but not by way of sexual reproduction, as was the case with Zeus), he gives creation a life outside himself. He is also named Father because he is both the Father and fatherly in his relations with his creation and his people. However, he is also motherly in those relations, and yet is not named Mother (Ruth 2:12; Hosea 13:8; Isaiah 42:14; 49:15; 66:13; et al.). This is not due to sexism or bigotry against women. This asymmetry protects the identity (and thus name) of the Begetter as Father, while affirming that the virtues of fatherliness and motherliness among divine image bearing creatures (human beings) have their ultimate source in God himself whose fatherliness and motherliness capture facets of his glory, love, and life.

A related concern at Nicaea was the affirmation that the Father never became Father but always has been and always will be the Father of the Son. The generation of the Son is "eternal," which is to say not in or with respect to time. Among many services this language renders is that it protects the concept of generation from suggesting a subordination of the Son to the Father by virtue of having been "born of" the Father at some point in time, and it also helps us understand why many theologians in the history of Church, including within the Reformed tradition, have wanted to affirm that the Son "receives" everything, including his deity and not only his sonship, from the Father, inasmuch as the generation is eternal and not a matter of the cause-and-effect pattern we know from the conditions of providence and history.[9] Either way, it has been most important in the Nicene tradition to insist against Arianism that there has never been a time when the Son was not, which means, by implication, there has never been a time when the Father was not Father.

Are there other ways it proves to be significant that God is named here not merely as God but as God the Father? One might wonder if the naming of the Father in relation to creation excludes the Son, not only from the focus of the Creed but from the act of creation itself. To the contrary, as the opening section (often called the "Prologue") of John's Gospel makes clear, for the Father to create all things *from* nothing is for him to create *through*

[9] For discussion, see Fred Sanders, "Only Begotten Son: The Doctrinal Functions of Eternal Generation," in Matthew Barrett, ed., *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (IVP Academic, 2024), 419-446. For examples among the Reformed, see Calvin, *Institutes* I.xiii.7, 23, 25; Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 130, 135; among many others.

the Son who is the eternal Word. Paul's letter to the Colossians further states that all things have come into being but are also *sustained* or *held together* in Him who is that same Word (Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:3). There is no tension, then, between the ascription of the creation of all things to the Father and the special identity and role of the Son in relation to that work of creation, for the creating act of God reflects the what we might call the "prepositional" *taxis* (ordering) of the trinitarian life: *of* or *by* the Father, *through* or *in* the Son, and *by* the Spirit. The doctrine of appropriations further clarifies our topic by affirming that the work of creation is the work of the one triune God but that which is appropriated especially and properly to the Father as he is the Unbegotten Begetter or Generator. Rather than detract from the Son or Spirit, then, creation by God ascribed to the Father reflects and is the product of the structure of God's being and life.

This truth is important in reverse, too. The Word is also not the Father, and the Word does not relate to creation in exactly the same way as the Father does. All created things subsist properly in the Son (again, Col. 1:17), not the Father, because the Son is the One *through* whom all things come into being. Furthermore, only the Son has a special personal relationship to creation, for he is the only One on whom the divine, triune act of Incarnation terminates. He alone among the Trinitarian persons assumes a created thing—the human nature—to his Person. Taking all of creation into view, then, all things in one way or another, and human beings especially and particularly, reflect the image of and subsist in the Logos, the Word, particularly. Yet nothing in creation can be collapsed into the being of the Logos himself. In Johannine terms, to see God is to see the Word specifically, who is fully God, but not the Father or the Spirit *as such*. However, given that the Son is the Son of the Father who is the eternal image of the Father, to see the Son is to see the Father in him (John 14:9). And so, nothing in creation "comes to" the Father except through the Son (John 14:6).[10]

Furthermore, the doctrine of creation puts the marvel of created power in perspective. Theologians have the greatest reason to join scientists, mathematicians, and poets in wonder at the mysterious and stupendously grand energy that creation exhibits from the smallest to the largest scales of observable or measurable reality. The relentlessly generative facets of creational life reflect the inexhaustible generativity that is the divine triune life. God does not *have* life. He *is* life, and his fecund works speak

[10] For an excellent analysis of how John 1 relates the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, to the Sinai event along the lines of invisibility/visibility, see Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Baker Academic, 2015), esp. ch. 3 ("Glory").

eloquently of that life. However, the life and energy of creation is not of the same order as the life that God is. As Ian McFarland explains, creation receives all its life from outside itself, from God, just as the Son receives everything from outside himself, from the Father. But the Son receives "everything" that the Father has to give, whereas creation does not receive "everything" that the Son has to give.[11] Not only is creational life of a different order than trinitarian life on account of it being *derived* from trinitarian life, but it is also qualitatively different: creational life arises from but is not a participation in the fullness of divine life, but is designed to reflect that original (and originating) life.

Is this restriction an instance of divine miserliness? Is God stingy with his gifts? To the contrary, as McFarland notes, he who is infinite has imparted the blessing of finitude, of bounded limits, so that the blessing of being, of existence, might be distinguishable from the eternal blessedness of his infinite life.[12] We may take this key observation even further. The trinitarian determination to form, in generosity and love, the bridal glory of the Son—which accounts for why there is something rather than nothing (Gen. 2:18-24; Eph. 1:3-23; Rev. 19:6-10; 21:1-4, 9-22; 22:1-5, 17)—is not merely *historical*; it *is* history. The eschatological *telos* of the bridal/motherly/city reality of the Son's glory which we may also call "the Church" accounts for what history *is*. As someone somewhere has said, therefore, the Church is not a moment in the history of the world; the world is a moment in the history of the Church. The Church, in the fullest possible sense of that term and from the perspective of her glorified "end," is, as the glory of the Son gifted by the Father in the Spirit, why there is something rather than nothing. The gift of life that is not God's own life in these terms accounts for the universal creaturely conditions of space and time, and thus of the gifted boundaries or limitations that define our life as not God's own and which yet arise from God's infinite generativity, his deep wells of living water. Creational life speaks of the excess of God's life, love, wisdom, and generosity, all at once.

Some Therefores

As a final thought, we ought not overlook a special marvel of a well-ordered doctrine of God, namely, that our theological starting point of investigating the relationship of "God and all that is not God" (John Webster),

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11 Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 97.

12 McFarland, *From Nothing*, 96.

or the similar "Creator-creature distinction" (Cornelius Van Til), provokes the many properly ordered "therefores" that make up the spiritual vitality, joy, and fruitfulness of the Church's life. This is to say that reflecting on God properly–which necessarily includes the proper worship of him in space and time–yields, in ever-increasing and varied ways, a life that glorifies him. Loving God with a right grasp of Who God is clarifies the nature of, and invigorates, the rightly ordered love of neighbor. This asymmetrical pairing of the Great Command and the one that is "like it" (Matt. 22:37-40) captures the whole of our calling in this life precisely because it is at the bottom of it all. The whole of our calling may be understood as the "therefores" that arise from, and derive from, knowing God as he has revealed himself to be *in doxological response*. The Christian life, and not only Christian theology, starts *and persists* with the doctrine of God.

What might these "therefores" include? What a joyful exercise it would be to chase this line of thought in every possible direction! We must content ourselves with only a few initial suggestions.

Consider transhumanism, the ideology often at work in contemporary technological innovation and marketing. This ideology amounts to a vision of the good life and of humanity's goal which idealizes the prospect of exceeding our human limits of embodiment in one way or another.[13] I suggest that one implication of the set of commitments articulated above is clear enough when brought alongside this new way of thinking. It is only *within* the conditions of creaturely limits, rather than in the quest to transcend them, that it proves possible to find the deepest and richest possible meaning, dignity, and value of one's created life in all its biographical and existential contours. The ideal for human life is not maximum efficiency that eliminates the dignity of human labor, a frictionless relational world that does not require the sacrifices of love, or the creation of allegedly superior, customized alternatives to time- and space-bounded human creatures. The ideal for human life is not escape from our creaturehood or creatureliness, but glorified fellowship with God and perfected fellowship with one another precisely as creatures, not the Creator. This, in turn, puts in sharp relief the considerable advantages of the Reformed rejection of the Roman doctrine of the *donum superadditum*, according to which the created conditions of Adamic human life are an obstacle to be overcome by the provision of a more transcendent mode of life, apart from which communion with God is not possible. Transhumanism may be plausible (although not

[13] Though now somewhat dated, see the discerning treatment in Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Ashgate Science and Religion Series; Ashgate, 2006).

required) by the Roman doctrine, but it is utterly ruled out from the outset by the Reformed position, which affirms that the nature of human life is religiously and liturgically ordered from the outset, by very definition rather than by supplementation, and precisely within the bounded limits inherent to our creatureliness.

However, the implications also clearly extend into wider and more apparently quotidian contexts, such as the dignity and value of valid human labor, the goals of education, the nature and measure of spiritual growth, and, of course, the identity of the Church's calling and ministry. Perhaps the greatest implication of all is simply this, that there is no more rational posture for human life than the posture of humble gratitude. We do not need to be, to exist. That we do at all is testimony to our Maker's excessive life, love, and generosity. Our existence, moreover, *contains* our calling, one which is realized in the redemptive grace of that same God: that we should be to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:12). For these reasons, and an infinite array of others, none of which we could ever fully appreciate, that same humble gratitude suffuses our altogether well-grounded trust. In the memorable words of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 26):

> Q. What do you believe when you say, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth"?
>
> A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence, is my God and Father for the sake of Christ his Son. I trust God so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

He is able to secure our welfare because he is almighty. He desires to do so because he is the infinitely good, faithful Father.

It is the Church's great delight in our time to seize upon the opportunities afforded us to explore what difference these implications may have upon our service to God and to one another. Such a quest may be prompted by meditation on the words of the Creed concerning God the Father, where we encounter the unneedy God who apparently even Voltaire knew, though perhaps despite himself, to be uniquely and utterly trustworthy. This is the God of the gospel that the world, and we, need. What a joy it is to know this is the God of the gospel that we have.

7. The Person of the Son: One Lord Jesus Christ

Robert Letham

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

These are the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, composed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, and universally called the Nicene Creed, confessed down the centuries thereafter and throughout the Church today. It is *not* the creed confessed at Nicaea in 325 AD. Added to the confusion is that, while the phrase "God of God" is widely included in the Nicene Creed today, it was not in its original version, although it was present in the Creed of Nicaea! The Creed of Nicaea, in its relevant section, runs like this:

> And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only-begotten of the Father, that is of the substance (ousia) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth ...

In effect, with the omission mentioned above and some explanatory additions introduced at Constantinople, both creeds cover the same ground at this point.

First, the Lord Jesus Christ is said to be the Son of God, and as such one of the Trinity

In 318 AD, an Alexandrian presbyter called Arius, charismatic, popular with women, a composer of praise songs, maintained that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father, came into existence out of nothing, and was a creature. An effective propagandist, Arius attracted a large following. For him, God was not Father eternally any more than a man is a father before he begets his son. The Son had an origin, *ex nihilo*. At some point he did not exist, and now exists by the will of God. God used the Son as an intermediary to create other entities; so God is effectively at arm's length from the

creation. Hence, the Son is a different being from the Father, for the Father is his God.[1] Jesus's statement "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) Arius's supporters took to mean a harmonious agreement of will, not identity of being. The Son was an assistant to the Father, operating under orders. The Son was and is not true God. These views Nicaea outlawed as heretical. The Council affirmed that the Son is *homoousios,* of the identical being, with the Father. This was its main and lasting achievement. For this statement there were, and are, massive biblical grounds.

First, is the constant and unprecedented way in which Jesus talks of God as his Father, with the corollary that he is the Father's Son.

While the title "Son of God" was used in the OT for the Messiah, and on occasion for Israel, it was unprecedented for an individual to speak in this way. From an occasional designation of God in the OT, "Father" is now his personal name, known in relation to Jesus Christ his Son.[2] The name "Father" refers to the unique relations of the Father to the Son, mutual relations within the being of God. God's revelation as the Father does not refer to a general fatherhood of all his creatures, nor to the way human fathers relate to their sons. "Father" here is not merely a simile (as if God is simply *like* a father) or even a metaphor, but it is a definite personal name. It follows that the Son is a personal name too.

Jesus refers to his relation with the Father in all four Gospels and across a wide range of circumstances. He speaks of the temple as "my Father's house" (Luke 2:49, John 2:16). At Jesus's baptism, the Father declares him to be his Son (Matt. 3:17). Repeatedly Jesus asserts that he was sent into the world by the Father (John 5:30, 36, 6:38-40, 8:16-18, 26, 29, 10:15-18), shares with the Father in raising the dead (John 5:24-29), and in judging the world (John 5:27). Jesus prays to the Father (Matt. 6:9, 16:17, Mark 13:32, Luke 22:29-20, John 17:1-26). In Gethsemane and on the cross Jesus calls on the Father, *in extremis* (Matt. 26:39-42 et. al., Luke 23:34). In John 17, Jesus speaks of the glory he shared with the Father before creation, anticipating its renewal (John 17:5, 22-24), reflects on his union and mutual

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1 Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 16, for Arius's *Profession of Faith* (*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889, 2/4:458).

2 Arthur Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1963), 171–95. In Paul, God is said to be the Father forty times. John uses Father for θεὸς (God) 122 times.

indwelling with the Father (vv. 20ff). Elsewhere, he defends his equality and identity with the Father (John 10:30, 14:6-11, 20), an indivisible union, so that his own word will be the criterion the Father uses in the judgment (John 5:22-24, 12:44-50). He tells Mary Magdalene he will ascend to his Father (John 20:17, cf. 16:10, 17, 28, 14:1-3).

On the other hand, Jesus also says that he is less than the Father (John 14:28), referring to his incarnate, human limitations. So he does nothing other than he sees the Father doing (John 5:19) and expresses ignorance of the timing of his return (Matt. 24:36).

As the Father raises the dead, so the Son gives life to whoever he wills (John 5:21). As the Father has life in himself, so he has given to the Son to have life in himself and to exercise judgment (John 5:26-29). To Thomas he says that to know him is to know the Father, and to Philip "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:6-9). Behind this is the fact that he and the Father are one (John 10:30), and that he is, with the Father, the object of the disciples' faith (John 14:1). The Father will send the Spirit in response to Jesus's own request (John 14:16ff, 26, 15:26). So the disciples' prayer to the Father is to be made in the name of Jesus (John 15:16). In Matthew, Jesus claims mutual knowledge and sovereignty with the Father (Matt. 11:25-27). H.R. Mackintosh described this passage as speaking of "the unqualified correlation of the Father and the Son."[3]

Second, there is Jesus's assertion of his equality and identity with God.

This occurred in the face of blasphemy charges by the Jewish leaders. He is charged with making himself equal with God (John 5:16-47) and later for identifying himself with God (John 10:25-39). In both cases, Jesus denies the charge, citing in support the plurality of witnesses required by Jewish law. His claims are true, not false. In John 14:1 Jesus co-ordinates himself with God as the object of faith: "Believe in God; believe also in me." Similarly, like frames around a picture, John refers to him as "God" in John 1:18 at the start of his gospel and has Thomas confessing him as "my Lord and my God" in John 20:28 at the end.

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[3] H.R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1912), 27. For a fuller treatment see Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Revised and enlarged edition; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2019), 26-32.

Paul's characteristic name for Jesus Christ is "Lord" (κύριος),[4] the Greek word commonly used for YHWH, the covenant name of God in the OT. In using it, not occasionally but pervasively, Paul shows he regards Jesus as having the status of God, fully and without abridgement. He makes no attempt to explain or defend it, mentioning it so unselfconsciously that, as Hurtado comments, it entails its being everyday currency among the early Christians. Paul's letters, the earliest of the NT documents, testify to belief in the full deity of Jesus Christ from the very start of the Christian Church, as its basic axiom, not as a point of contention. It was assumed as given in Palestinian Christianity. This, Hurtado points out, is confirmed by the Aramaic acclamation in 1 Corinthians 16:22, μαράνα θά (Lord, come!). Paul uses this in a Gentile context without explanation or translation, addressing Christ in a corporate, liturgical prayer, with the reverence shown to God. Moreover, the roots of this prayer are Palestinian, not Greek, yet widely familiar beyond its original source and probably pre-Pauline.[5]

The author of Hebrews, too, in his argument for Christ's supremacy, cites Psalm 45 to support the incarnate Son as possessing the status of God (Heb. 1:8-9). This is underlined in the rest of the chapter. The Son is the brightness of the Father's glory, the express image of his being. As Torrance puts it, Christ is "not just a sort of *locum tenens*, or a kind of "double" for God in his absence, but the incarnate presence of *Yahweh*"[6]

Towering over all else in the NT is Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection discloses that Jesus is Lord, and from there the deity of Christ becomes "the supreme truth of the Gospel ... the central point of reference consistent with the whole sequence of events leading up to and beyond the crucifixion."[7] At the center of the NT message is the *unbroken* relation between the Son and the Father.[8]

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4 See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 291–301; Wainwright, *Trinity*, 757–92; O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 54–59; Lebreton, *Trinity*, 267–80, 303–6; and from an Eastern perspective, Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition* (Anthony P. Gythiel; Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 114ff.

5 L. W. Hurtado, "Lord," in G.F. Hawthorne, ed., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 560–69.

6 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 51.

7 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 46.

8 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 49.

Third, Jesus is described as creator, judge, and saviour.

These are works God alone can do. John declares that Jesus Christ is identical with the eternal Word who made all things, who is with God and who is God (John 1:1-18). Jesus is the Word who became flesh. Not one thing came into existence apart from that Word. The Word who is "in the beginning" (note the allusion to Genesis 1:1) is "with God," directed toward God and, moreover, is God. Paul echoes this (Col. 1:15-20). Hebrews 1:1-4 says the same, for the Son is the one through whom the world was made and who directs it toward his intended goal. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul couples God the Father "from whom are all things," and the Lord Jesus Christ "through whom are all things," referring to their respective work in creation.

In John 5:22-30, Jesus describes himself as the judge of the world; this can only be God. In Matthew 25:31-46, as the Son of Man in Daniel 7:14 presides over the eschatological judgment, so Jesus as the Son of man will judge the nations with righteousness (cf. Mark 8:38). Paul is emphatic (1 Thess. 3:13, 5:23, 2 Thess. 1:7-10); we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

The OT stresses that deliverance could only come from Yahweh, not man (Ps. 146:3-6). The name "Jesus," required by the angel, means "savior." He was to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). His healings demonstrate him to be the lord of life. The cumulative impact of his creative and healing miracles indicates deliverance from all that enslaves. Beyond that, he delivers from sin and death.[9] Since salvation is a work of God, Paul's persistent description of Jesus as savior is an implicit attribution of deity (Titus 2:11-13, 1:4, 3:6, Phil. 3:20, 2 Tim. 1:10; 2 Pet. 1:11).

Fourth, worship is directed to Jesus.

A number of NT passages express praise to Jesus Christ. They each have a hymnic metre. They indicate Christ to be an object of worship, entailing recognition that Christ is one with God (John 1:1-18, Heb. 1:3f, Col. 1:15-20, Phil. 2:5-11, 2 Tim. 2:11-13). Dunn argued that these passages are *about* Jesus rather than hymns addressed *to* him, and that we only find the latter in Revelation.[10] However, the way Jesus is described in these passages *requires* that hymns be addressed to him.

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[9] Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), especially chapters 7, 10, and 11.

[10] James D.G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

Prayer is also offered to Christ, by Stephen as he is being stoned (Acts 7:59-60). Paul too prays to the Lord (2 Cor. 12:8-9) and refers to an apparently common cry "The Lord come!" or "*Maranatha*" (1 Cor. 16:22, cf., Rev. 22:20). He also appeals to both "our God and Father" and "our Lord Jesus" to direct his way (1 Thess. 3:11-12). He called on the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 9:14, 21, 22:16). While in first-century Judaism prayers may have been offered to angels, these prayers distinguish him from intermediaries, placing him on the same level as the Father.[11]

Fifth, pre-existence is attributed to him.

A consensus developed some time ago, of which James Dunn was an exponent, that belief in Christ's personal pre-existence was a gradual development, crystallizing only relatively late in the composition of the NT. Certainly the later NT contains much such material (Heb. 1:3-4, 8-9, 1 Pet. 1:20, Rev. 1:17, 3:14, 22:13), but there is ample evidence that it was known earlier. Dunn was strongly opposed by *inter alia* Seyoon Kim,[12] while Larry Hurtado considered that belief in Christ's pre-existence came "remarkably early" and was "an uncontested and familiar view of Christ in Paul's churches."[13]

This sheds light on other Pauline passages. Romans 8:3 and Galatians 4:4 can be seen afresh to refer to the coming of the *pre-existent* Christ for our salvation. Together with the prologue to the gospel of John and the introduction to Hebrews they reflect a belief present in the Church from the very start, that Jesus's birth at Bethlehem was incarnation, the coming into the world of God the Son as man.

As Torrance says, we rely for our belief in the deity of Christ not on various incidents recorded in the Gospels or on particular statements but "upon the whole coherent evangelical structure of historical divine revelation given in the New Testament Scriptures. It is when we indwell it, meditate upon it, tune into it, penetrate inside it, and absorb it into ourselves, and find the very foundations of our life and thought changing under the creative and saving impact of Christ, and are saved by Christ and personally reconciled to God in Christ, that we believe in him as Lord and God."[14] In consequence, Torrance continues, we pray to Jesus as Lord, worship him, and sing praises to him as God. No wonder Thomas, confronted

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11 Wainwright, *Trinity*, 100–101.

12 Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

13 Hurtado, "Pre-Existence," in *DPL*, 746.

14 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 53.

with the very tangible evidence of Jesus's resurrection, could say in response, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is described as "the only-begotten of the Father"

Since the second century, the Church had held that the Father begat the Son in eternity. Later, Constantinople II (553) anathematized those who rejected it. This doctrine has come under fire on both biblical and theological grounds. Since the nineteenth century, many NT scholars have held that the word μονογενὴς[15] means "only" or "one and only." It is also held that Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son, this day I have begotten you," is cited in the NT of Jesus's resurrection (Acts 13:33) and so does not refer to the eternal relations of the Father and the Son. Furthermore, it is argued that the eternal generation of the Son implies that the Son is subordinate, and that its roots are neo-Platonic.

However, the older idea of μονογενὴς has never been eclipsed. More recently, it has staged a comeback.[16] Among other factors, where μονογενὴς occurs in the NT, in John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18, and 1 John 4:9 each context relates to Christian believers being born or begotten by God. The verb γεννάω[17] is used in each place. John 1:14 - "and we saw his glory, glory as of the μονογενὴς from the Father, full of grace and truth"—focuses on the Son's incarnation, life and ministry. Those who believed in him were born of God (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν); their regeneration is sharply distanced from physical generation (v.12-13). The idea of birth or begetting is pervasive. As God has become the Father of believers in their regeneration, the Word/Son stands in relation to the Father as his μονογενὴς. Later, in verse 18, the Word is described as "μονογενὴς God [or Son], who is in the heart of the Father." Again, the immediate reference is to his being in the immediate proximity of the Father, a relation self-evidently transcending the purely temporal.

In John 3:16-18, Jesus has confronted Nicodemus with his need for a radical rebirth, without which he cannot see the kingdom of God. The regenerative work of the Spirit is indispensable for eternal life. Moreover, γεννάω occurs seven times in verses 4-7. Jesus talks of birth or begetting

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15 *Monogenēs,* "only-begotten" in older NT translations.

16 Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain, *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), especially the chapters by D.A. Carson, 79-97 and Charles Lee Irons, 98-116.

17 *Gennaō,* to beget or to give birth.

by the Spirit, mysterious and inscrutable. The Father sent his μονογενὴς Son to give eternal life to all who believe (v. 16). As before, the reference is to the Son in relation to the Father, in connection with regeneration. Similar connections exist in the passages in 1 John.[18]

In each case, John has in focus the Son's relation with the Father throughout his earthly life. Moreover, this relation is eternal, preceding creation (John 1:1-3, 18, 8:58, 20:31). The connection with spiritual generation makes it impossible to eliminate any reference to generation in connection with the Son. While the doctrine of eternal generation does not stand, fall, or even depend on this one word, claims that it has no bearing on the question are false.

The statement in Psalm 2:7, "[The Lord] said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you,'" while carrying a royal reference in Israel, comes to expression in the resurrection of God's Son to reign over his enemies. Paul cites it thus in his speech in Acts 13; the same may be meant in Hebrews 1:5. However, again it points beyond, to the relation between Yahweh and the one he calls "my Son," signifying the identity of the speaker (Yahweh) and the addressee (Yahweh's Son). Its fulfillment in Jesus's resurrection does not exhaust it. Furthermore, support is found in statements such as the Son being the radiance of the Father's glory (Heb. 1:3).

Furthermore, the criticism that eternal generation entails a lesser status for the Son, as an emanation from the Father in neo-Platonic guise, cannot be sustained. This is not how the creeds understand it.[19] The Fathers had uniformly acknowledged it to be ineffable and passionless, and that all ideas of human generation be removed. Human begetting entails a beginning of existence; human fathers exist before their sons are begotten. This is not the case here. The Father is always the Father, the Son is always the Son.[20]

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[18] See J.R.W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 192; Kenneth Grayston, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Johannine Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 145. In Stott's words, "It is the high privilege of the Christian to be like Christ ... begotten of God and therefore sons of God." He adds that our begetting and sonship are different from his, which are unique and eternal, but they are sufficiently similar to make it possible for John to use almost identical expressions to cover both.

[19] Cf., Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 3:4 (NPNF, 2/5:144–6).

[20] On the eternal generation of the Son and its application to the relations of the persons, not the divine essence, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), 1:278-302, esp. 292-302.

Generation is ineffable and incomparable.

The eternal generation of the Son reflects God's incomprehensibility and is a transcendent mystery, beyond our mental grasp. We cannot explain it. It is a matter of faith. This poses no problem, or else faith would be based on our own capacities. It exposes our creaturely limitations. For the Fathers, it was a great mystery. The idea that they were given to speculative attempts to explain it is not borne out by the sources.

The Arians made deductions from the generation of human sons, concluding that the Son of God had a beginning, that God became Father at that point. The premise generated the heresy. In contrast, the one correspondence between the two forms of generation is that the generated is of the same nature as the generator; therefore, the Son is of the identical nature to the Father. This alerts us to the danger of reading back into the trinity patterns intelligible in the created order; if anything the latter reflects the former.

Simultaneously, the dogma asserts identity of nature and personal distinctions, the heart of the doctrine of the trinity.

The Son is not the Father, the Father is not the Son, the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Yet the three are one. That the Father is not the Son is not a matter of difference or diversity but distinction. So, as Aquinas says, the Father is other than the Son but not something else, while they are one thing but not one person.[21] The Father is the principle (*principium*), citing Augustine, "that whence another proceeds."[22] Aquinas argues against calling the Father the cause of the Son, since it implies diversity of substance, but "principle" entails simply an order between them, a procession and no inferiority. The word does not signify priority but origin.[23] Eternal generation underlines the point that the Father is the Father of the Son in eternity before he is ever Father of the creature in time.[24]

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21 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.31.2.

22 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 4:20 (NPNF 1/3:83–5).

23 Aquinas, *ST*, 1a.33.1; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13:18.

24 Aquinas, *ST*, 1a.33.3. For a fuller discussion see Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 4:10–14.

Generation highlights an irreversible hypostatic order (ταξις).[25]

The NT authors refer to the three persons in differing orders (1 Cor. 12:4-6, 2 Cor. 13:14, Eph. 4:4-6, Rev. 1:4-5, Matt. 28:19-20) but there is a general pattern evident throughout the economy of creation, providence and grace; from the Father through the Son by the Spirit, seen *inter alia,* in the baptismal formula (Matt. 28:19). In turn, our response to God's grace is enabled by the Spirit, offered through the Son and resting on the Father (Eph. 2:18). God's revelation in human history reflects eternal antecedent realities, for he is faithful to himself and acts in conformity with who he is. Thus, this order is irreversible. The Father sends the Son, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son, never the reverse. The relations of sending and being sent reflect the order of begetting and being begotten. There is a distinction, although the two are inseparably related. In this sense only, the Father is the first, the Son the second, and the Holy Spirit the third. There is a distinction - not a division - between the three as they distinctly and together constitute the one undivided being of God and the three in their eternal and distinct personal relations. Since there is only one being of God consisting of the three persons, the generation and procession concern the relations of the persons.

The strategic significance of the doctrine.

As Bavinck states, "God's fecundity is a beautiful theme." He argues that the doctrine of the generation of the Son displays God as "no abstract, fixed, monadic, solitary substance, but a plenitude of life. It is his nature to be generative and fruitful."[26] Indeed, "without generation, creation would not be possible. If, in an absolute sense, God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature."[27] Bavinck here reflects the classic trinitarian

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[25] *Taxis* has a range of meanings. It was often used in military contexts and had the idea of rank, entailing a hierarchy of some kind. This fitted in well with the Arian view of a gradation between the Father and the Son, with the latter of a lower and subordinate status. However, it was also used of role, office, class, orderliness, and regularity of the stars, order in the Church or monastery, or an ordered constitution. It is in this sense of order, not rank, closer to what is fitting and suitable rather than any hierarchy, that the orthodox used the term. See G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1372–73.

[26] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:308.

[27] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:420.

doctrine, that the persons are oriented to the other. The Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father. The three are inherently relational. This relationality underlies God's free determination to create - an act of his will, exercised in harmony with his nature.[28] To this, much earlier, both Nicaea and Constantinople testified.[29] Athanasius's earlier discussion, in which he wrote that Jesus's pervasive affirmation of his relationship to the Father "signified that the divine nature was inherently generative", pre-echoed this and equally affirmed that it was essential for creation to take place.[30]

The dogma of eternal generation is part of the cement holding together the doctrine of the trinity.

The generation is eternal since the Father and the Son are eternal. As Bavinck puts it, "rejection of the eternal generation of the Son involves not only a failure to do justice to the deity of the Son, but also to that of the Father" and "it is not something that was completed and finished at some point in eternity, but an eternal unchanging act of God, at once always complete and eternally ongoing ... The Father is not and never was ungenerative; he begets everlastingly."[31] Since God is eternal and transcends time—which he created—the trinitarian relations are eternal. There is not a punctiliar moment when the Father begat the Son, for that would place generation within the parameters of space-time and be contrary to its place within the eternal life of the indivisible trinity.

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[28] This connection between the generation of the Son and creation has also been considered by Aquinas, *ST* 1a.14.8, 19.1-4; Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 4:323-331. See Eugene R. Schlesinger, "Trinity, Incarnation and Time: A Restatement of the Doctrine of God in Conversation with Robert Jenson," *SJT* 69 (2016): 189–203, esp. 200.

[29] For a demonstration of how this inscrutable reality has direct impact on the gospel and the whole of life, see Robert Letham, "The Doctrine of God and the Pulpit," in William R. Edwards, John C.A. Ferguson and Chad Van Dixhoorn, eds., *Theology for Ministry: How Doctrine Affects Pastoral Life and Practice* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2022), 25-35.

[30] See Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 3. See also 159-222.

[31] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:310.

Illegitimate conclusions

The Arian argument that human sons are derived from and subordinate to their fathers led to their contention that the Son is subordinate to the Father. At Nicaea and later at Constantinople, the Church rejected the conclusion as heretical and opposed the premise as mistaken. Rather, the Son is equal with the Father in status, power, and glory. He is identical in being from eternity. In short, to take the created reality as definitive of the life of God is a serious error, leading to dire results. It follows that eternal generation is emphatically opposed to subordination.[32] The order—from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit—is not hierarchical, nor patterned after human relationships. Rather, it is an order of equals, in the identity of the indivisible trinity.

Being begotten denotes that Jesus Christ, the Son, is the creator

"Begotten, not created" we sing each Christmas, in the favorite hymn "O come, all ye faithful." Since the Son is begotten by the Father, receiving his personal subsistence in what Gregory of Nyssa described as "a revolving circle of glory," he is not a creature but is one with the Father from eternity, of one identical being yet hypostatically distinct. Generation is in contrast to creation.

This was the basic issue in the trinitarian crisis, the one foremost for Athanasius. The doctrine of eternal generation obviates any notion of the Son as a creature. In the Creed, both the positive "begotten" and the negative "not made" are equally vital. The confession of his begetting denies that he was created, underlining again his identity of nature with the Father.

This is explicit in the statements concerning the Son as, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the creator - "through whom all things came into existence" (Nicaea) and "by whom all things were made" (Constantinople/Nicene Creed). In the Nicene Creed, it should be seen together with its first clause "We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" and the later reference to the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and giver of life." All three persons were inseparably yet distinctly involved in creating the universe and sustaining it thereafter.

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[32] *Contra* John V. Dahms, "The Generation of the Son," *JETS* 32 (1989): 493–501; John V. Dahms, "The Subordination of the Son," *JETS* 37 (1994): 351–64.

Consequently, as the Constantinople/Nicene Creed added, he is the single object of worship together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is he who "for us and our salvation" became man, uniting human nature to himself forever, such that it is his own. Just as I personally am writing these things and doing so in accordance with my human nature, so the Son acts in accordance with his natures and is the active personal subject of all actions and speech attributed to him in the Gospels.

Impact on the Church's life

The Creed underlines the point that the focus of the Church is on Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, indivisible. No reasons can and should be given to justify this; God is his own all-sufficient reason. This should lead to a radical reorientation of much of the Church's worship, life, and ministry. For too long, it has given prime attention to the needs and desires of the surrounding human culture and its occupants. As one Puritan—I believe it was Thomas Goodwin—remarked, "God did not bring Christ into the world for you; he brought you into the world for Christ."[33]

It means that if we want to know what God is like, we look no further than Jesus of Nazareth, "Christ according to the flesh, God over all" (Rom. 9:5), now risen, ascended, and glorified. "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Since he came as man, suffered, was rejected and betrayed, died and was buried, experiencing the full range of human traumas at an unprecedented depth, our own predicaments are known to God, for the Son has undergone *human* suffering, *human* death, and *human* burial, and has emerged triumphant on the other side.

In this light, that the Son is *under* the Father in his incarnate lowliness according to the flesh is compatible with his being *from* the Father eternally in the unity of the indivisible trinity. Nowhere is this expressed more vividly than by Paul in Philippians 2.5-8: "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ," he says. The incarnate Christ followed a path of obedience and humiliation, leading to the cruel and, especially for those in Philippi, a Roman colony, shameful death of the cross. He looked not to his own interests but to those of others. This loving self-sacrificial obedience is the fruit of his decision in eternity, expressing the indivisible will of God in its particular manifestation in the Son, not to exploit his status "in the form

[33] This should not be taken to mean that the Church should in the least neglect those needs! The point is that its loyalty is pre-eminently to its head, and it is to him, not to the prevailing human predilections, that it is responsible.

of God" for his own ends.[34] "Being in the form of God he did not use his status of equality with God for his own advantage but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."[35] He emptied himself by becoming man and following a path of obedience that led to the death of the cross. He took the form of a slave while remaining who he forever is. However, his choice to do this was prior to his doing it. His determination not to exploit his true and real status for his own advantage was made in eternity. His human obedience *under* the Father flows from his eternal relation *from* the Father. Hebrews 5:1-10 runs along similar lines, referring to Christ's refusal to claim the office of high priest for himself but rather accepting his appointment by the Father. John Owen, among others, referred this to the covenant of redemption in eternity.[36]

This is what the eternal Son is like. We are to follow suit. It should affect the way we treat people. When God seeks his glory, he is not pursuing self-interest like a celestial bully. The trinity is an indivisible union, a union of love, each seeking the interests of the other. Thus, the Father allows the Son to bring in the kingdom, the Son leads us to the Father, while the Spirit does not speak of himself but testifies of the Son.[37] This was articulated originally by Gregory of Nyssa, when he wrote that in their mutual indwelling the three seek the glory of the others. There is, he says, "a revolving circle of glory from like to like. The Son is glorified by the Spirit; the Father is glorified by the Son; again, the Son has his glory from the Father; and the Only-begotten thus becomes the glory of the Spirit ... In like manner ... faith completes the circle, and glorifies the Son by means of the Spirit, and the Father by means of the Son."[38] Therefore, says Paul, we are to look not to our own interests but to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4).

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[34] On the phrase ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ see *inter alia* Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

[35] The word ἁρπαγμὸς has been the subject of intense debate down the years. See Roy W. Hoover, "The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution," *HTR* 64 (1971): 95–119; Ralph Martin, *New Century Bible: Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 96–97; N.T. Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians ii.5–11," *JTS* 37 (1986): 321–52.

[36] *The Works of John Owen* (William H. Goold; Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1855) 19:77-86.

[37] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–98), 1:315–17.

[38] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius,* 24 (NPNF 2/5:323–24).

8. The Work of the Son: God For Us in History

Brandon D. Crowe

[W]ho, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.[1]

The Priority of the Person of the Son of God

The Nicene Creed's affirmations about Jesus do not begin with his work in the Incarnation, but with his identity as the divine Son of God. The Son is and always has been the eternal Son of God. This priority of the divine personhood of Christ must guide the way that we understand the Creed's affirmations about Christ's work in the Incarnation. It is the divine Son of God who came to deliver us from sin. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only begotten Son of God—God of God, light of light, very God of very God. He is by nature divine, differing in no way as fully divine from the nature of the Father and the Spirit. He is Creator and Redeemer.

These affirmations pertaining to the Son's divine personhood must be clear before we consider the Creed's teaching on the work of Christ. The existence of the Son as the Son "prior" to the Incarnation is crucial to understanding the efficacy and grace of his work in the Incarnation. It is this divine Son who came down from heaven for us and for our salvation. The Creed has the humiliation of our Savior in view. Our Savior is the divine Son of God—very God of very God. And yet this One who is eternally begotten of the Father came to earth as a true human in order to save people whose nature he shares in the Incarnation. He came to suffer, die, and rise again in glory, as the Creed goes on to confess. The logic of the redemption accomplished by Christ is one that requires both the divinity and humanity of our Savior.

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1 Text taken from *Reformed Standards of Unity: The Historic Statement of Faith Confessed by the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter A. Lillback and Bernard Aubert (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 5, updated for style.

That the Son is divine means he is, as the Son, not less than the Father in essential being. The Father and the Son (and Spirit) share a common essence and one will. The Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in his essential being or in his will. That the Son is truly God draws attention to the marvelous grace of the Incarnation: the Son came freely, not of compulsion, in order to free those who had been shackled by sin and the fear of death. Here we can bring the Creed into conversation with the Epistle to the Hebrews:

> For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers… Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Heb. 2:10, 14–15)[2]

It is the Person of the Son who became incarnate for us and for our salvation. The one who is the true Son of God became truly man that we might truly have salvation from our sins. He came not for himself, but for us—we who were sinners incapable of saving ourselves.

The Two Stages of Our Savior's Incarnate Work

After the Creed affirms who the Son of God is as the divine Son of God, it proceeds to outline his work on our behalf. Christ's work is divided into two stages or two states: 1) the state of humiliation and 2) the state of exaltation.[3] The state of humiliation includes his being born of Mary by the Holy Spirit, his crucifixion, his suffering, his death (clearly implied in the Creed, though not stated explicitly), and his burial.[4] The state of exaltation commences with his resurrection and also includes his ascent into heaven, his reigning at God's right hand, and his future return in glory as judge.

The Creed does not provide a detailed discussion of all that Christ accomplished. We might wonder why the life of Jesus is so briefly mentioned. The Creed says nothing, for example, of the wonderful miracles Jesus

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2 All English translations in this essay are taken from the ESV.

3 See Kevin DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2025), 54–55.

4 See DeYoung, *Nicene Creed*, 54–55.

performs in the Gospels.[5] Instead, the Creed emphasizes the key disputed points of Jesus's work. The Creed does not say all there is to say about Jesus's obedience or ministry, but mentions his crucifixion and suffering by way of synecdoche to refer to the whole of Jesus's incarnate work. The Creed focuses on key, climactic events accomplished by Christ, and on those events that were crucial to affirm rightly in the context in which the Creed was written. These are not the only events that are important, but they are a summary to provide guidance for understanding the whole.

Given that framework, let us now examine these two states or stages of Christ's work in more detail: humiliation and exaltation.

State of Humiliation

Incarnation

The same "one Lord Jesus Christ" whom we confess as very God of very God is the one who was made low for our sake. The immutable God of the universe, the Second Person of the Trinity, was made incarnate without ceasing to be the immutable God. Mystery of mysteries! Who can fathom the depths of this marvel?

The Creed specifies it was by the agency of the Holy Spirit that the Son became incarnate. Mary was a virgin; Jesus's birth was not a birth by ordinary means from a man and a woman, but it was supernatural (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:31, 34–35). Yet his birth in time was a real, human birth. His human nature was created from Mary. Jesus shares in all the essential aspects of our humanity. He is truly one of us. All that it means to be human, Christ is. Yet the difference is that Jesus was born entirely without sin. Sin is not essential to human nature; it is a consequence of Adam's fall. Adam and Eve were not created as sinners. Jesus, therefore, does not—indeed cannot—share in our sinful estate. He is the New Adam, who was not represented by the first Adam when the first Adam sinned (see Rom. 5:12–21). Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her, and the child that would be born would be holy (Luke 1:35). This seems to indicate that the Holy Spirit preserved the sinlessness of the child Jesus in the womb of Mary, so that he was born of her without sin. The Creed does not spell this out, but that Jesus saves us from our sins necessarily means that he is free from sin.

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[5] Editors' note: For a proposal on why this is the case see the next essay below, "The Missing and Present Christ: Observations on the Nicene Creed's Selectivity in Confessing Christ."

Thus was Christ made man—that is, he became human. This does not mean that the Son of God changed in his essential being, for he always remains immutable (see Heb. 1:10–12; 13:8). As it has been commonly observed in church history: he continued to be what he was (the divine Son of God), but in the Incarnation he became what he was not before—a true human. Here again it is important to remember the priority of the Person: Jesus as an eternal, divine person eternally is divine by nature. Yet in the Incarnation, he takes on a new nature—a human nature—without divesting himself of his divine nature. This refers to what theologians call the hypostatic union: the *union* of two natures in one person (i.e., one "*hypostasis*"). This means that some things can be said of Christ by virtue of his human nature in the Incarnation that could not be said of the Son as Son apart from the Incarnation. For example, it is not possible for God (and thus it is not possible for the Son of God) in himself to suffer. Yet in the Incarnation, as the Creed affirms, Christ did indeed suffer. Such statements can be made because of the reality of the Incarnation, by virtue of Jesus's human nature.

The reality of the humanity of Jesus is a very big deal. Jesus did not simply *appear* to be a man; he truly became man. He did not only appear to suffer, but in the Incarnation, during Jesus's state of humiliation, he did indeed suffer. He was made under the law (Gal. 4:4) and bore the penalty of the law throughout his life, and especially in his death.

Crucifixion, Suffering, Burial

Indeed, the Creed moves directly from the birth of Jesus to his crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea when Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion was a brutal way to die, and Jesus must have suffered horrendously, in a physical sense, on the cross. Yet Jesus's crucifixion was not simply the suffering of an individual—it was the crucifixion of the Suffering Servant who gave his life to redeem his people (see Isa. 52:13–53:12).

The Creed's inclusion of Pilate's name also indicates that the Creed is pointing us to historical events. Pontius Pilate may be a distant, somewhat shadowy figure to us, but for those who wrote the Creed (the first version was written in A.D. 325), the Roman Empire was still a live reality, and Pontius Pilate was a Roman governor whose existence was much more proximate. Those who gathered to affirm this Creed affirmed that earlier in the days of their Roman Empire Jesus was crucified under the jurisdiction of the Roman governor. The death of Jesus was no myth or mere idea to them; it was a matter of historical record.

Indeed, the Creed is intensely historical throughout. The Creed is a confession of historical events and realities; Christianity itself is irreducibly

historical. The Nicene Creed confesses the acts of God in history, and in this portion of the Creed we affirm explicitly redemptive history—a summary of what Christ has done to save us. In the Creed we affirm theological history—as the Bible itself does (e.g., Luke 1:1–4).

Significantly, Jesus died by means of a public crucifixion. This demonstrates the legal nature of Jesus's death. He died publicly, as a representative, and was condemned to death for sins he did not commit. Paul writes that Jesus became a curse for us on the cross, for Deuteronomy states that the one who is hanged on a tree is cursed (Gal. 3:13, quoting Deut. 21:23).[6] Jesus was offered up for the sins of his people so that those who are in him might become righteous in him (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21).

The suffering of Jesus is an affirmation of his true humanity. He did not only *appear* to suffer; he truly suffered as a true man. The work of Christ in relation to his true humanity is an emphasis of the New Testament writers (see 1 John 1:1–4; 4:2; 5:6), and it continued to be an emphasis in the early church (note, e.g., the letters of Ignatius of Antioch in the second century).

Jesus suffered as one who is truly man, and his burial points to the reality of his death. Here is a profound mystery: the immortal Son of God dies. This requires nuance to understand what we do and do not mean. We do not mean that the eternal Son of God is passible or can cease to be the eternal, ever-living Son of God. But we do mean that by virtue of his human nature in the Incarnation, the Son of God can die. Given the unity of the Person—there is only one Person in the Incarnation—what can be said of the human nature of Christ can be said of the Person of Christ. As Ignatius of Antioch writes concerning Jesus, "There is only one physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and unborn, God in man, true life in death, both from Mary and from God, first subject to suffering and then beyond it, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Ign., *Eph.* 7:2).[7]

Crucially, the affirmation that Jesus was crucified and buried accords with the early creedal traditions found in Scripture itself. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:

> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1–4)

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6 See also Heidelberg Catechism 39.

7 Translation from Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 189.

Jesus's death and burial are matters of first importance. The same is true of his resurrection, which brings us to a consideration of Jesus's state of exaltation in the Nicene Creed.

State of Exaltation

Next, the Creed discusses Jesus's state of exaltation, which includes his resurrection, ascension, heavenly session, and future return. Jesus's work is not finished in his state of exaltation, but "In the state of exaltation there still remains much for Christ to do."[8]

Resurrection

Jesus's state of exaltation commences with his resurrection from the dead, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15:4. And as in 1 Corinthians 15, the Nicene Creed affirms Jesus's resurrection on the third day. These, again, are historical affirmations. The resurrection is not an idea or a "spiritual" reality (if by that one means that Jesus did not really, physically rise from the dead). No, the resurrection is the bodily restoration of the life of the Son of God, the same one who was crucified and buried. Later in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul affirms the resurrection of Jesus is indeed the resurrection of the second and last Adam: "For as by a man came death, by man has come also the resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:21).

Notice too that the Creed, like 1 Corinthians 15:4, affirms that the resurrection on the third day is "according to the Scriptures." This is evident in the preaching of the Apostles in Acts, where Peter explains that Jesus is the promised Son of David whose resurrection fulfills Psalm 16:

> David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' (Acts 2:25–28)

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[8] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 568, noted in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Work of Christ Applied," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 268–69.

Later Paul uses the same psalm to show the scriptural contours of Jesus's resurrection (Acts 13:35), combining it with Psalm 2:7 ("You are my Son, today I have begotten you," Acts 13:33) and Isaiah 55:3 ("I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David," Acts 13:34) in relation to the resurrection of Jesus. Further on in Acts, Paul focuses on his resurrection message, which hinged on the resurrection of Jesus himself, as the fulfillment of what the Prophets taught (Acts 26:6–8; see also 26:27). The apostles in Acts were witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:22; 3:15).

Indeed, Jesus himself explains in the Gospel of Luke that his resurrection on the third day was necessary according to the Scriptures (Luke 24:46). The Nicene Creed is therefore on firm exegetical footing to speak of the resurrection of Jesus in accordance with the Scriptures. The resurrection of Christ is not only a teaching of the New Testament, but was already anticipated in the Old Testament itself.[9]

Ascension and Heavenly Session

The state of exaltation also includes Jesus's ascension into heaven and his heavenly session—Jesus reigns now from heaven. The heavenly ascension of Jesus is recorded in the New Testament at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9). In the book of Acts, the Apostles not only preach about the resurrection of Christ, but they also preach about his heavenly reign. Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand (Acts 2:33), and this fulfills Psalm 110:1: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" (as quoted in Acts 2:34–35). Indeed, Psalm 110:1 is one of the most frequently quoted texts in the New Testament, and it speaks of Christ's victorious, heavenly reign after his resurrection. Notice, for example, how Paul speaks of the present, heavenly, authoritative reign of Christ over every spiritual force in Ephesians 1:19b–23:

> according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

[9] See further Brandon D. Crowe, "Resurrection," in *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 693–98.

This language reflects Psalm 110:1: Christ is seated at the right hand of God and all things are under his feet. Christ is presently reigning in heaven, having conquered every rebellious spiritual force.

If we keep reading in Ephesians we will find a complementary perspective to what we find in Acts 2. In Ephesians 4, Paul speaks of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that were poured out on the Church as a direct result of Christ's victorious ascension (Eph. 4:1–16). Paul applies Psalm 68:18 to the ascension of Jesus and relates this to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is evidence that Christ has ascended on high. We also read about this outpouring in Acts 2, where Peter explains that the Holy Spirit is poured out as proof of Christ's ascension. This is the fuller context for Peter's quotation of Psalm 110:1 I mentioned earlier:

> This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:32–36)

By being "made" both Lord and Christ, Peter does not mean that Jesus was *not* Lord and Christ prior to his ascension (compare Luke 2:11). Rather, he speaks of a redemptive-historical advance in the mission of Jesus. Now Jesus has come, died, risen, and ascended, and he reigns as the incarnate, glorified Son of David over the Kingdom that he has inaugurated through his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. This "made" in Acts 2 is akin to saying Jesus was "installed" as heavenly King. Reformed theologian Francis Turretin explains: "Christ was made Lord after the resurrection (Acts 2:36), not in essential dominion (which he had even from the foundation of the world as the maker of all things) … but in personal and economical dominion."[10]

Elsewhere, Paul writes that all things are under Christ's feet (1 Cor. 15:27), but he also looks ahead to a time when all things will be fully subject to Christ (1 Cor. 15:28). A similar point is found in Hebrews 2:8–9. As with so much in New Testament theology, the enemies under Christ's feet are an "already/not yet" reality. Already Christ has conquered and reigns over

[10] Translation from Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–97), 1:290 (3.28.31).

all things from heaven, but there remains opposition to Christ in this age. In the future that opposition will be overcome completely (this topic is addressed in the Creed in the following portions on the return of Christ).

Note the "directional" movement in the Creed: in relation to Jesus's state of humiliation, we confess that Jesus came down from heaven; in relation to Jesus's state of exaltation, we confess that Jesus has ascended into heaven. The one who ascended is the one who first descended (see Eph. 4:9–10). But notice something important about the ascension of the one who had previously descended: Christ ascends as a victorious king—the one who has conquered, particularly through his death and resurrection in his state of humiliation—and reigns now as the one who has conquered. He reigns as the victorious Lord and Christ. Though he was Lord and Christ from the time he was born, he has ascended as the victorious, exalted Lord and Christ. The Son of David has accomplished redemption. And just as he has ascended as the victorious King, so he will return in glory.

Future Return

The Nicene Creed thus speaks of two comings, or advents, of Christ. The first coming was in humility and obscurity, the second will be in glory and observable by all (compare Justin, *Dial.* 14). Jesus himself proclaims before his crucifixion:

> Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61b–62)

The first part of Jesus's statement invokes Psalm 110:1 to speak of his ascension and heavenly reign. Debate has ensued about what Jesus meant by his "coming." Some have suggested that Jesus refers here to his ascension.[11] But a more likely reading is that Jesus is speaking of his return in glory. Jesus's coming is with the clouds of heaven, which mirrors the way that Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:11).[12] Further, two different stages of Jesus's state of exaltation appear to be in view: the first is Christ's heavenly session indicated by the use of Psalm 110:1; the second is Jesus's return in glory, which utilizes language for the coming of the Son of Man

[11] E.g., R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 611–13.

[12] Though there are also differences with respect to the return of Jesus; see David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 115–16.

from Daniel 7:13.[13] How and when will they see the Son of Man coming? If Jesus is speaking of his return, which seems most likely, then his opponents will see the Son of Man coming because they will see him at the last judgment (compare Mark 13:26–27).[14]

In Jesus's first coming, he was judged and wrongly condemned unto death. In Jesus's second coming, he will come as the final Judge to execute righteous judgment. The Father has "granted [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man" (John 5:27). In Jesus's first advent—corresponding to his state of humiliation—he inaugurated the Kingdom of God. The Creed confesses that when Jesus returns in glory, he will judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end.

Yes, Jesus reigns now, and his Kingdom is already here. But the Creed points us to an even more glorious future of Christ's Kingdom, when all things will be under his feet and he will do away with all opposition. "When all things are subjected to [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). Here Paul has redemptive history in view. He does not mean that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in his essential being; theologians have rightly rejected this option in light of the teaching of Scripture as a whole.[15] For example, Herman Bavinck provides one way to understand 1 Cor. 15:28:

> [T]he mediatorship of reconciliation, and to that extent also the prophetic, priestly, and royal office of Christ, ends...But what remains is the mediatorship of union. Christ remains Prophet, Priest, and King as this triple office is automatically given with his human nature, included in the image of God, and realized supremely and most magnificently in Christ as the Image of God."[16]

This is the Jesus we confess in the Creed. We must not think only of Jesus as he was in his state of humiliation. We must recognize that he is now the ascended Lord who is going to return in glory in the future. We celebrate his coming in the past, but we also look ahead to his coming in the future.

This is the Jesus we serve: the one who is presently the conquering, victorious King and who reigns over his Kingdom from heaven. That

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13 See Murray J. Smith and Ian J. Vaillancourt, "Enthroned and Coming to Reign: Jesus's Eschatological Use of Psalm 110:1 in Mark 14:62," *JBL* 141 (2022): 513–31.

14 Smith and Vaillancourt, "Enthroned," 526.

15 E.g., Turretin, *Institutes* 14.17.10–11 (2:493).

16 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:482; see also Daniel J. Treier, *Lord Jesus Christ*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 290.

Kingdom has come in the past, but it will come even more fully in the future. He is the eternal Son of God, yet he is also David's greater Son, the Son of Mary according to the flesh. He is truly God and truly man, and is therefore uniquely able to save us from our sins. He is the God-man, the only one in whom is salvation (John 14:6). There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12) because no one else is the God-man who has conquered sin and been raised from the dead. Our Redeemer must be God to deliver us from sin, but he must also be man to obey in our nature.[17] He will come again in the future to consummate his Kingdom, and to be in that Kingdom then, we must be in that Kingdom now.

Salvation Accomplished

Christ has accomplished salvation, which the Nicene Creed addresses in relation to the two states (and two comings) of Christ. It is important to understand that the Jesus of Scripture—and the Jesus of the Creed—is not a figure relegated to the past, but he is the living Lord now.

Notice also how important history is—what Christ has done really matters. Let it not be said that history and theology are two different "realms" or that true history cannot and must not be "theological." No indeed! The Creed speaks of the *redemptive history* of what Christ has done for us. In real space and time, in true human nature, the Son has become incarnate and conquered sin, for us and for our salvation. These are not simply abstract ideas or theological speculations. These are statements, according with Scripture, of what Christ has done for us. Luke tells us that we can be confident that the things he writes in his Gospel really happened (Luke 1:4). The Creed speaks of supernatural history. Christianity as confessed in the Creed makes supernatural claims about what Christ has done for us in history. To deny the possibility of supernatural history is to deviate from core Christian claims. Christianity is not speculation of non-historical ideas; it makes supernatural claims about history, and supernatural claims about Jesus himself. Crucially, these are not our speculations, but they are revealed truths from Scripture that we must receive in faith.

[17] See Westminster Larger Catechism 38–40; Heidelberg Catechism 16–17.

9. The Missing and Present Christ: Observations on the Nicene Creed's Selectivity in Confessing Christ

Mark A. Garcia

***Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again**, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.*

Introduction: The Mystery of the "Missing" Christ

The first and final forms of the Nicene Creed move directly from the virgin birth and incarnation of the Son to his crucifixion, omitting any mention of his life and ministry between these two features of his person and work. After stating that he "came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;" we read "and was crucified also for us ..." The Creed has this feature in common with the Apostles' Creed, which moves similarly from "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" to "He suffered under Pontius Pilate ..." As we will discover below, these are far from the only early Christian texts that perform this leap. This phenomenon has puzzled and sometimes troubled Christians over the centuries, and for various reasons.

In his 1541 Catechism, written fairly early in his ministry, Calvin notes the leap in the Apostles' Creed from Christ's virgin birth to his passion, and provides (in Q. 55) what may be a rather surprising take on its significance: "Why do you go immediately from His birth to His death, passing over the whole history of His life? Because nothing is said here about what belongs properly to the substance of our redemption."[1] Later, in his final, 1559 *Institutes*, his view widens to clearly affirm the importance of the "other part of obedience," but traces of his earlier perspective remain noticeable regarding what he still sees as the "admirable" gap in the Creed:

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[1] "Calvin's Geneva Catechism," in T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Churches* (London: James Clarke, 1959), 13.

> In the Confession of Faith, called the Apostles' Creed, the transition is admirably made from the birth of Christ to his death and resurrection, in which the completion of our perfect salvation consists. Still there is no exclusion of the other part of obedience which he performed in life. Thus Paul comprehends, from the beginning even to the end, his having assumed the form of a servant, humbled himself, and become obedient to death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7).[2]

Does this creedal leap in fact constitute an oversight? Does it entail that the life and ministry of Jesus is immaterial to the Gospel? Or is there—as I will suggest there is—a contextual and theological reason for this feature of early Christian statements which served an important purpose in the early Church and remains important to appreciate now?

The most fruitful path toward understanding this question requires that we think together of subjects often separated, namely, the nature of early Christian catholicity, the function of creeds and other summaries of the Faith, and the specific content of early theological challenges to orthodoxy with respect to the person of the incarnate One. A uniting thread in these three subjects is the challenge posed by Ebionism and the special importance of a remark made by Ignatius of Antioch. While this essay cannot explore these matters fully, I aim here to coordinate them in such a way that a fresh appreciation of the Creed's move may be appreciated for what it does and does not entail. We begin with Ignatius and the background to his famous introduction of the word "catholic" into Christian literature.

The Special Importance of the Christ of the Eucharist

Ministering shortly after the death of the apostles, Ignatius of Antioch is known, among other things, as the first clear advocate for the Church's catholicity, introducing the term "catholic" in a letter to the Smyrneans. As Steve Harmon has argued, Ignatius envisioned a catholicity that was not only quantitative—i.e., including the whole Church—but also qualitative.[3] In other words, by "catholic" Ignatius intended not merely the fact that the Church is universal, but that the Church is who she is as she partakes together in the coherent fullness of faith and order and pattern of life

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[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics XXI. Edited by John T. McNeill; translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.xvi:5.

[3] Steve Harmon, "Qualitative Catholicity in the Ignatian Correspondence—and the New Testament: The Fallacies of a Restorationist Hermeneutic," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38 (2011): 33-45.

which is—as will be argued below—visibly expressed in one specifically eucharistic fellowship.[4]

It will be clear by the end of this investigation that I am persuaded Ignatius is alert to something that has often been eclipsed in Reformed contexts, and which merits a thoughtful (and enthusiastic) recovery in our time. But the role of eucharistic life in Ignatius's understanding of catholicity may seem peripheral to a concept many have treated, incorrectly, as merely a synonym for "universal." Many Protestant churches, in fact, regrettably replace the Creed's use of "catholic" with "universal," at least in part because the terms are assumed to mean the same thing, in which case it is assumed that the latter is preferable to avoid confusion with *Roman* catholicity. This is most unfortunate and reflects a misunderstanding of "catholic" in theological context.

In addition, the Eucharistic element in Ignatius's introduction of the term may seem to some to be too pre-Reformational in focus and incompatible with Reformed sensibilities which privilege (it is thought) the pulpit. Yet this is where we may need to recall something easily forgotten about the Reformed tradition. As it took its historical point of departure in the sixteenth century, the Reformed tradition did not begin as a tradition on a basis of the sovereignty of God, the doctrine of predestination or of covenant, and did not distinguish or summarize itself along the lines of what would be called much later (in fact quite recently) "five points" or "five solas." In fact, none of these ideas define or identify the Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition has its origins instead in the question of eucharistic communion with Christ, in particular as a position taken on the question of how we enjoy communion with Christ at the Table and how we should understand Christ to be "present" to the Church at that Table. Beginning with the *Consensus Tigurinus* (Zurich), the Reformed tradition represented a developing and competing claim to orthodoxy regarding how Christ is eucharistically present to and for his Church. In its origins, the Reformed position emerged as it was set opposite the differing Lutheran perspective (itself also developing), which represented a different set of commitments and conclusions regarding what *all* the reformers agreed was central to the Church's life and faith, namely, how Jesus Christ is the saving food and life of the Church in the context of eucharistic fellowship. We only need to read what the Lutherans were writing against Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and others, and we only need to read Calvin's own shorter writings against Westphal and Heshusius, to appreciate

[4] For a study on the meaning of catholicity, see Bryan M. Litfin, "Origins of Catholicity in the Apostles' Creed," *JETS* 64.3 (2021): 545–61.

that this is precisely how all participants in this polemic understood the stakes of these differences.[5]

Therefore, at the heart of the Reformed tradition as a historical reality is a commitment to the real presence by the ministry of the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Christian confession, whose real, human, circumscribed body is necessary for us to have salvation. For the Reformed, the communion that we enjoy with Christ at the Table does not come about through the mingling (or in some other way a communication) of the natures of Christ in a horizontal interpenetrating relationship, as the Reformed have understood the Lutheran and some other models to argue. Instead, eucharistic union between Christ and the Church is the special work of the Holy Spirit who unites things otherwise distant. It is his special ministry to impart life to the Church by faith by uniting earth to heaven in such a way that the Church communes s/Spiritually and truly with the body and blood of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, who remains and always shall be the incarnate God-man. In our communion with him as such—and only in such a communion—do we really know life. With this brief reminder of the origins of the Reformed theological tradition, we may return to Ignatius to notice certain key features of his use of the term "catholic."

Ignatius and the Catholic Jesus Christ

Ignatius was an early second-century teacher and bishop in Antioch whose introduction into the Christian lexicon of the word "catholic" was occasioned by his concern for identifying the proper criterion of orthodoxy. The key passage is in his letter to the Smyrneans 8:2, where he says, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church."[6] As we have noted, this is the first instance of the word "catholic" in Christian literature. But what exactly does he mean by this? Those familiar with Ignatius's work will also ask: to what extent does the fact that Ignatius says not "Jesus" and not "Christ" but "Jesus Christ" figure in what he means by catholicity?

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5 The literature is voluminous. For single-volume access to many of the pertinent points here, see the texts collected in John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Christian Heritage, 2002).

6 There are several quality editions available. Among these, note the text first established by J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer and published in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). I will follow the convention of simply referring to Ignatius's texts by their audience, e.g., "To the Smyrneans" or just "Smyrneans."

Living immediately after the death of the apostles, Ignatius also lived in an age very similar to the modern West. His society was avowedly pagan and pluralistic. The Church was threatened by persecution from without and division from within. A chief threat to the Church was pluralistic syncretism, which was poised to disrupt and dissolve the Church at a time when the first generation after the apostles was trying to preserve the faithful deposit that they had received. Around the year 110 AD, Ignatius exhorted by letter each of the leading churches in the regions through which he was passing on his way to his own martyrdom in Rome. In these letters, we find a clear, compelling vision of the Church and of her faith along the lines of her catholicity.[7] The traditional interpretation of Ignatius's words in Smyrneans 8:2 emphasizes the bishop and his ecclesiology. It is not very difficult to understand why. The passage as a whole reads:

> See that you all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ follows the Father and the presbytery as it were the apostles, and reverence the deacons as the command of God. Let no one do any of the things pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be present. Just as *wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church*. It is not lawful either to baptize or to hold an agape without the bishop, but whatever he approves this is also pleasing to God—that everything which you do may be secure and valid.[8]

It is easy to appreciate why the traditional reading would give so much attention to the role of the bishop in Ignatius's argument. There is no question that the bishop is indeed a key to his theology of the Church, particularly as one reads his letters as a whole. He insists throughout these letters that eucharistic worship, which remains his preoccupation throughout this letter, is valid, sure, and trustworthy only when the bishop or someone that the bishop appoints is present.

That said, it is critically important for us to appreciate that there is a context for his concern. He has learned of the offensive practice of certain schismatic groups who meet with the gathered church assembly for some things but then to go off (secretly?) into their corners to celebrate "the sacrament" (or some version of it) without the bishop's involvement, and in many cases, in outright rebellion against that local bishop. The reason for these schisms and this practice is highly significant: the difficulty in the

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[7] Kenneth Paul Wesche, "St. Ignatius of Antioch: The Criterion of Orthodoxy and the Marks of Catholicity," *Pro Ecclesia* 3.1 (1994): 89-109.

[8] Emphasis mine.

Church's early days of appreciating the admittedly world-altering truth of the full incarnation, including that Jew and Gentile are both truly one in Christ Jesus, and that neither has the spiritual advantage over another.

The Jew-Gentile question is highly relevant here. In the days of the New Testament and in the generation that followed, a species of Jewish heresy had rapidly developed which would prove to be the special concern in Ignatius's insistence on the bishop. This heresy will occupy us more directly below, but for now we should observe that Ignatius's insistence on the bishop is something that requires closer inspection. There is more than meets the eye here. The bishop's importance in Ignatius is a derivative importance—derivative, that is, of the true criterion and substance of catholicity. The bishop is undoubtedly important, and yet it is clear in Ignatius that the bishop does not *constitute* the Church. Ignatius also frequently insists that his readers must hold onto the true *teaching* of the Church. Some have therefore suggested that while the bishop is important, it is in fact the Church's teaching (her orthodoxy) that is the real criterion of catholicity for Ignatius.

For instance, in an illuminating passage from his letter to the Magnesians 11:1, he says, "I want you to be firmly convinced about the birth and the suffering and the resurrection of Jesus Christ our God, which took place during the time of the governorship of Pontius Pilot. These things were truly and most assuredly done by Jesus Christ our hope, and from this hope may none of you ever be turned aside." (We should notice here what will be explained later, namely, that in this statement about what the Church believes, he refers to our Lord by the name "Jesus Christ" twice: not as "Jesus," not as "Christ," but as "Jesus Christ.") For Ignatius, this is only one of many other summary expressions of the teaching of the Church. But even the teaching of the Church is still at least slightly derivative of what Ignatius has in view with respect to the Church's catholicity. Strictly speaking, the criterion of catholicity for Ignatius, particularly in Smyrneans 8:2, is not Jesus, is not Christ, and it is not even Jesus Christ as an item or a datum of orthodox teaching *per se* (more these names below). It is, as others have noted in a compelling way, specifically the Jesus Christ of the eucharist or of the Table.

The context for this entire section of his letter, as well as for the preceding section (chapter seven), in keeping with the concern found throughout Ignatius's extant correspondence, is the aberration of a body (community) calling itself "the Church" and yet celebrating/participating in the sacrament in a way that is disorderly, potentially heretical, and inconsistent with the Church's identity. In fact, the stress on the bishop would appear to be derivative along these lines. You have to have the bishop not because the bishop constitutes the Church but because, in a nuanced and properly understood sense, the *Table* constitutes the Church,

and the Table requires the Christ-appointed president or officiant on the one hand and the gathered recipients on the other, the combination of which constitutes the sacred assembly. You can have preaching outside the sacred assembly. The book of Acts, after all, includes a record of sermons preached by the apostles Peter and Paul, and all these sermons are preached *outside* of the assembly. You can also have prayer outside the sacred assembly. You can have giving, praise, confession of sin, and more, but one thing you cannot have outside the sacred assembly and still be thought of as the Church is the sacrament(s), because in a unique way by very definition it requires an affirmation of the reality of the bodily incarnation of the Son in true human flesh, and is also a churchly rather than individual rite, requiring the distinction-within-harmonious-unity of the appointed minister and the ministered.

The Christ that Ignatius has in view as present is specifically the Christ of the Table, not the Christ of one's ideas, not the Christ merely of one's doctrine, but the Christ as confessed by the Church who is truly God and man and is personally and truly present to his Church at the Table. This complex determines catholicity so that "where Jesus Christ is present, there is the catholic church."

The Ebionite Challenge

Now, how this functions as a criterion for catholicity for Ignatius still requires explanation, but we know at least at this first stage of our exploration that what makes a community truly catholic (churchly) for Ignatius is not just any would-be eucharist. Instead, it must be the eucharist of the incarnate Son who was and remains fully God and fully human. Anyone familiar with the primary texts of the sixteenth-century Reformation and especially the text at the heart of the origins of the Reformed theological tradition will hear very little that is new here. This sounds like it was lifted directly from Calvin's *Second Admonition to Joachim Westphal.* Indeed, what Ignatius is saying here will in fact set a trajectory that bears beautiful fruit in the time of the Reformation.

To understand Ignatius's own way of speaking, however, requires that we enter into a classic question: who are Ignatius's docetists? To move directly to the most likely solution, I note the compelling conclusions reached by Michael D. Goulder.[9] Golder's thesis is that the species of

[9] Michael D. Goulder, "Ignatius' 'Docetists'," *Vigiliae Christianae* 53.1 (1999): 16-30. For fuller documentation and argumentation for the argument proposed in this essay regarding Ignatius, see Goulder.

"Docetism" (which, like Gnosticism, is not a definite body of teaching but a general category of heretical ideas with a family resemblance to one another) in Ignatius's context is the one that goes by the name of Ebionitism (Ebionism). This proposal was first suggested in 1672 by John Pearson.[10] Goulder has revived the theory and provided extensive documentation for it. Ebionitism (Ebionism) is an old Jewish, Christological heresy which has (arguably) rather conspicuous roots in the New Testament itself as a form of Judaism the apostle Paul was likely dealing with in some of his most polemical epistles. While he was visiting Philadelphia, Ignatius experienced heated resistance by certain Jewish Christians, apparently Ebionites.[11] In his letter to the Philadelphians 6-9, we learn that people there taught Judaism, including some of Gentile birth called "the uncircumcised." We read that they refused to regard the Gospels as Scripture and instead gave authority only to the *archaia*, a word used for the Old Testament writings.

Importantly, when Ignatius addresses this problem in his letter to Smyrna, he fully expects that the Smyrnians will be persuaded of his arguments simply by listening to the Old Testament itself. Hearing it in the Church or in the synagogue should be sufficient to protect them from the dangerous Ebionite errors. Ignatius illustrates an expectation of what in fact the New Testament leads us to expect, namely, that the Old Testament Scriptures have an abiding witness to the Lord Jesus Christ with and alongside the New Testament Scriptures, and that their witness to Christ does not fade away but instead is distinctly established and sealed by the special function of the New Testament Scriptures. Both Old and New Testament Scriptures bear witness to the same reality: the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition to the Old Testament, Ignatius also directs them to the Gospels of our New Testament, to the tradition and the proclamation he had received orally, and in some cases apparently to portions of what we call New Testament writings, despite his very early place in the story of canonical formation. In these New Testament writings, or in the tradition and proclamation of the New Testament Gospel, it is made clear, Ignatius insists, that Jesus Christ the Lord really suffered and rose again. From Ignatius's arguments, it appears that in some way, the trouble-makers in Smyrna and Magnesia did not regard the Gospels as Scripture any more

[10] According to Goulder, who refers to John Pearson's work *Vindiciae Epistolarum S. Ignati* (Cambridge 1672). For Pearson on catholicity, see his *An Exposition of the Creed* (London: 1659; 4th edition 1676), 345-351.

[11] It is sometimes suggested that Jewish Christianity was largely limited to the churches of Philadelphia and Magnesia, so if there was an Ebionite problem, it might be limited only to these two cities. In fact, as scholars have shown for some time, there are indications of this same problem in many places.

than the Judaizers or Ebionites did in Philadelphia. It appears, too, that they are known for severe errors of a Christological kind, errors which threaten the very reality of the Church as the Church where these errors are found.

While confidence regarding some details evades us, Ignatius's central concern is already suggested in his opening chapter to the Magnesians, in which he says that he prays that there may be in the churches "unity (harmony/oneness) in/of the flesh and spirit of Jesus Christ." The letter ends with the same prayer. Now, it is far from uncommon for pastors to pray publicly for the unity of the churches. But it is at least a little curious to read a prayer specifically for a *fleshly* union, or a union as it pertains to the *flesh*. What exactly is Ignatius concerned about?

Jesus, Christ, and Jesus Christ

The key is in the name Ignatius uses: "Jesus Christ." This is an often-repeated formula throughout Ignatius's letters. The name in this form was evidently incompatible with the Christological teaching of the Judaizers found among the Ebionite groups—their "Docetism," to speak generally. In Trallians 9:1 Ignatius says, "Be deaf, therefore, when any man speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ." Somehow, the Docetists speak *apart from Jesus Christ*. How so? In Smyrna chapter two, Ignatius says, "Certain unbelievers say that he suffered in semblance." With Pearson, Golder, and others, I suggest it is most likely that these unbelievers ("faithless ones," as he calls them) were specifically Ebionites, which would explain his reluctance to use the single term "Jesus" or "Christ," each of which appears only five total times in his extant letters. In contrast, he speaks of "Jesus Christ" (or "Christ Jesus") approximately 130 times.[12]

Ebionite theology provides the polemical reason for his strong predilection for "Jesus Christ" or "Christ Jesus" rather than "Jesus" or "Christ." We can infer the Ebionite view not only from Ignatius but also from Irenaeus's extensive descriptions of the Ebionite heresy. It appears from these early Christian writers that the Ebionite would say, "Yes, of course, *Jesus* suffered on the cross, but *Christ* left him before his passion, and *Christ* only *seemed* to have suffered." According to Irenaeus, the Ebionites, who circumcised their sons, followed Jewish customs, used only Matthew's Gospel, reject the apostle Paul as apostate, and prayed towards Jerusalem, supposed that Jesus had not been born of a virgin but was instead the son of Joseph and Mary conceived like all the rest of mankind. He was more

[12] Goulder, "Ignatius' 'Docetists'," 24.

righteous, more prudent, and more wise than other men. At his baptism, however, the *Christ* descended from the supreme power into *the man Jesus* in the form of a dove. From that point, now possessed of the divine Christ, he (now properly called "Jesus Christ") proclaimed the unknown Father and performed wonderful miracles in divine power. But as he neared the time of his passion, the Christ departed from Jesus. This *Christless Jesus* is the one who suffers, dies, and is raised again. *Christ*, as the divine power, is not capable of confusion with flesh and suffering. He remains untouched by suffering since he is and was an eternally spiritual being, separated from the infirmities of flesh. Only "Jesus" suffers and dies.

This is evidently what the Ebionites taught. In light of this, we notice that the period during which the Ebionites claimed that *Christ* possessed Jesus is the period from his baptism to his passion, the same period noticeably excluded from Ignatius's various creedal summaries. We note four examples:[13]

1. "For our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary according to a dispensation of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost, and he was born and was baptized that by his passion he might cleanse water."
2. "Be ye fully persuaded concerning the birth and passion and resurrection which took place in the governorship of Pontius Pilate. For these things were truly and certainly done by Jesus Christ our hope."
3. "Jesus Christ who was of the race of David, who was the son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth, who moreover, was truly raised from the dead, his Father having raised him."
4. "He is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, the Son of God by the divine will and power, truly born of a virgin and baptized by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him, truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch that he might set up a sign unto all the ages through his resurrection."

Each of these statements summarizes what Christians believe. They serve as creedal catalogues, brief summary statements of what is central to the Christian faith. In every case, Ignatius consistently excludes the period from Jesus's baptism to his passion. Why? To affirm strongly what is true of *Jesus Christ*, not "Jesus," not the "Christ," but *Jesus Christ*, where the two are united in one person. He avoids (excludes) the life of Jesus, his miracles

[13] These examples are listed by Goulder, "Ignatius' 'Docetists'," 26.

in power, and his successful teaching ministry because this is the period about which there is no dispute. Both orthodox and Ebionite Christians are happy to speak of "Jesus Christ" with respect to this period. Ebionites claim this is the time when the Christ is visible. The Christ, the divine element, is performing miracles, performing wonderful signs, speaking marvelous things. But, they say, the Christ who descends on Jesus at baptism is removed (or leaves) at the passion. Therefore, the dispute concerns whether this same *Jesus Christ*, or instead a Christless and merely human Jesus, is the one who suffers and is crucified. Given that speaking of "Jesus Christ" for the period from the baptism to the passion is not disputed by the Ebionites, Ignatius focuses only on the other parts of Jesus's story in order to assert that these also are true of the *one* who is *Jesus Christ*.

The "Missing" Jesus Reconsidered

Having read these summary statements from Ignatius, there is something else we are now in a position to notice as well. This is also the period in Jesus's story—baptism to passion—that we have observed is "missing" from the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and other summaries in the very early Church of the Christian faith. Each of these documents has origins that reach deeply into the earliest days of the Church. The form of the original Nicene Creed itself apparently began with the church in Caesarea who sent their version of the *regula fidei* ("rule of faith") to Nicaea as a suggested starting point for the Council's work. In the extant examples of what we call the *regula fidei* as found in Tertullian, in many examples in Irenaeus, and others, this "leap" in speaking about the life of Jesus Christ is a conspicuously frequent phenomenon. There is often in these *regulae* a creedal movement from the virgin birth of Jesus to his baptism and then a leap all the way to his suffering and passion, crucifixion, resurrection, and appearances.

In context, the combination of the Ebionite heresy, Ignatius's reasons for preferring the Name of Lord "Jesus Christ" to "Jesus" or "Christ," and the examples of the *regula fidei* found in other early Christians suggest that the "missing" Jesus of the early creeds is not evidence that the early Christians thought the "missing" elements unimportant. Instead, as summaries whose original baptismal contexts required the Church's ability to distinguish true Christian faith from close counterfeits, affirming the truth in this form has a strategic, polemical aim. Confessing the *Rule* or the Creed specifically rules out what was among the most powerful and destructive of early Christian heresies that had survived the days of the apostles: the denial that the One of the cross is fully the One incarnate as fully God and

man for us and for our salvation. Precisely by confessing "Lord Jesus Christ" with respect to the suffering and crucifixion confirms one is not an Ebionite gnostic.

For Ignatius, Jesus Christ was and is a single physician to heal, restore, and make whole. Unlike the Ebionite view of a split person who is a fleshly Jesus temporarily possessed by a spiritual Christ, Ignatius insists on the one Lord Jesus Christ, in whose real and abiding flesh and blood the Church lives. She confesses him in his integrity and unity as the only Savior of men because she believes in him and communes with him. He can only be the Bread of life for his people if he is the continuing, incarnate Lord raised from the dead in flesh and blood. As Ignatius understood well, you cannot be an Ebionite at the Church's Table. You cannot be a Docetist there. This is why Ignatius points to the Table. In his famous remark "where Jesus Christ is there is the Catholic Church," he is affirming this central truth of orthodox faith: where the real *Jesus Christ* is—not "Jesus" only, not "Christ" only, but "Jesus Christ," defined and understood in these terms, confessed in the integrity of his one person consisting of both natures—wherever *that* (eucharistic) *Jesus Christ* is, there is the catholic Church. A church that would confess a different Jesus and would presume to commune with that different Jesus, whether in a eucharistic context or any other, is a pretending church. There is no source of life to be found in connection with their Table of a less than truly incarnate Lord. The person of Christ in his integrity as the God-man who continues in flesh and blood to be the life of his Church is the *sine qua non* of catholicity.

In addition to helping us understand why early creeds appear to be missing material regarding Jesus Christ, reflection on Ignatius's arguments also encourages us to account fully in our time for the importance of the Christ of the creed for faith and life. In Ignatius, for the Church to be catholic, she must take his body seriously, and in two respects. First, she must take his body seriously in the sense that she must take his Church seriously. Secondly, she must take Christ's body seriously in the concrete particularity of his flesh and blood, the substantial materiality of his person, which continues in its material glory at the Father's right hand. Whereas the Ebionites taught a non-bodily resurrected being, Ignatius insists on the united reality of the one Lord Jesus Christ who gathers his Church catholicly around himself in word and sacrament. The word declares who he truly is and confesses him in keeping with the truth. The sacrament, which is the Word made visible, is the gracious means by which the Church may metabolize the Word and Christ she receives into faith, hope, and love.

By implication, every time the Church comes to the Lord's table, she is also refusing Gnosticisms of every sort. At the Table, the Church steadfastly

rejects that ideology and philosophy of human flourishing which would suggest that what we *think* is what we *are* without remainder, that what we believe in our head is all that matters in the end. Instead, at the Table, the Church confesses that she is not a body that depends and lives only by ideas or doctrines embraced or believed. She is who she is as the Church precisely as she embraces the meaningfulness of the circumscribed, real, human body of the God-man, and therefore affirms that the human body is, for both Christ and his people, a deeply meaningful and rich part of life, faith, and hope.

10. The Holy Spirit: Confessing in the Eloquence of the Spirit

Mark A. Garcia

The greatest of the spiritual blessings, if blessings may be graded in some way, is the confession that Jesus is Lord.[1] It is the supreme blessing inasmuch as it rather directly echoes who God is by nature (as we shall soon discover, my choice of "echo" is quite deliberate), even as it also signals the possession of God himself in our union with the eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is of course the Blessing *par excellence*. In ways we will only ever be able to trace out in wonder and never exhaust, our spiritual gift of a faithful confession has its roots in who the trinitarian Spirit *is* and what the trinitarian Spirit *does*. Adding to the marvel of it all, this gift the Church enjoys becomes the gift the Church gives in turn through her proclamation of Christ, a proclamation that breaks the silence the world confuses with God's absence.

These are reflections which, while impossibly wide in scope and depth, are prompted by meditation on a few (perhaps curious) words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians set alongside the Church's observation of the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea:

> Now, concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:1-3 ESV)

"Speaking Together With"

For many years now, scholars of New Testament and early Christian worship have argued persuasively that the most primitive of the Church's confessions is the deceptively simple affirmation "Lord Jesus Christ." In these three titles joined as one sacred Name, the God of Israel, the man of Nazareth, and the Messiah of promise are confessed to be One, and particularly

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[1] This essay appeared in a simpler version in the fall 2025 issue of *Westminster Magazine*, reproduced in modified form here by kind permission.

that One who was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven.[2] But what is happening when the Church faithfully confesses that she believes the truth of "Lord Jesus Christ," and uses particular words like those of Nicaea to do so?

Of course, many answers have been given to this question, most of them perfectly sensible. Often we are told, for example, that regularly confessing something like the Creed is an act of verbalizing the orthodox Faith that protects us and generations to come from dangerous error. Or perhaps we do this in order to remember the core elements of our Faith and thus avoid forgetting them. Or perhaps we confess the Creed to commend the Faith to a watching world, or to express our own identity in fundamental agreement and continuity with our forefathers in the Church who also heard Scripture's witness to the truth along these very lines.

We can multiply such answers in many variations, and all of these answers are accurate and true as far as they go. But they all carry a special vulnerability, too, for they suggest that confessing Christ is something that the Church does primarily for catechetical or historical-traditional or evangelistic reasons, reasons that have something to do with defending and commending the true Faith. Without question, these are valid, even urgently important facets of the Church's confessing life. But may we say more than this? Is it possible even to say that the Scriptures do not merely suggest such a practice but fully expect it as a way the Church will in fact prove to be the Church and not some counterfeit rival? And may say, too, what exactly is happening, *theologically*, when the Church confesses Jesus Christ? The very word "confession" puts us on the right track, I think. To break down the etymology of the word we would have something like "speaking together with" (Latin *con-fiteri*; Greek *homologein*).[3] But with whom are we "speaking together" when we, the Church, confess "Lord Jesus Christ"? The Church of all ages, yes. But only the Church?

The Gift of the Eloquent Spirit

It would seem that the opening words of 1 Corinthians 12 can help us here. The Corinthians desire the presence and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They

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[2] Among the most influential studies, and a good place to begin an investigation into this phenomenon, is Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

[3] Ian McFarland, "The Ecstatic God: The Holy Spirit and the Constitution of the Trinity," *Theology Today* 54 (1997), 336.

know, after all, against the background of the unmistakable message of the prophets, that having the promised Spirit means that they are folded into God's saving work in his Messiah, Jesus Christ. Possessing the promised Spirit would show that they belong to the reconstituted Israel of God, the people on whom the promises of the covenant God of Israel fall as blessing rather than judgment. They want the Spirit, they want his gifts, they want to be sure the Spirit is among them. And for his part, Paul does not discourage this desire but he is concerned that they know first what it means to have the Spirit, since it is easy to mistake the signs of the Spirit's presence: "I don't want you to be uninformed." To instruct them properly, he then starts with a curious reminder. "You remember, don't you?" Paul asks. "You remember that time before you were a Christian, when you were outside of Christ, when you were pagans? You remember how you were led astray to mute idols?"

Mute idols? What does this have to do with the presence of the Spirit? To Paul, false gods are mute gods. His characterization of false gods as mute idols recalls those psalms (such as 115:5 and 135:16) which deride and mock the gods of wood and stone. Undoubtedly, he also has in mind the prophets who described a rebellious people in the same way, as those who tragically partake of the image of the false, mute gods. "Having eyes, they see not, having ears, they hear not, having mouths, they speak not" (cf. Isa. 6:9-10; Jer. 5:21; Ezekiel. 12:2). Paul pulls from that eminent, long-standing tradition of mocking false gods to say, "Remember those gods you used to follow, when you were led astray by them? They were mute idols." False gods are mute.

Mute idols stand opposite the eloquent, verbose, the very wordy true and living God. The true God, Who *is* the Word, speaks. Not only does he speak; the true God is effusive with his words, and having the Spirit of God means enjoying and—here is the key—participating in his eloquence. We speak because we are made in the Image of the Speaking God.[4] But this requires that we know *what* the Spirit "says" so we know how the Church's speech can be regarded as speech joined to the Spirit's speech in some way. Paul tells the Corinthians that you can recognize the absence or the presence of the Spirit of God in the Church by what is being confessed concerning Lord Jesus Christ. "So I want you to understand," he says in v. 3, immediately after his curious remark about mute idols, "no one speaking in the

[4] On this, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Speech and the Image of God: Biblical Reflections on Language and Its Uses," reprinted in *Word and Spirit: Selected Writings in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 336, and the essay as a whole.

Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed' *and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit*."

"Jesus is accursed," say some. "Jesus is Lord," say others. These brief lines solemnly pull us back to a solemn scene, a scene that Paul and his audience know well. It is the darkest scene of the darkest moment in the history of everything. It is the scene, of course, of the cross, where many in the crowd peer at the crucified Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. They remember what he said, they remember what was said about him, and they watch him there suffering in agony, finally dying, and they conclude—some only in their hearts but others also with their mouths—"This one is accursed. This one is cursed by God. Jesus is accursed."

The Authenticating Voice and the Sound of Silence

We would do well to pause here for a moment and reflect on the importance of that scene on Good Friday, because it may help us understand what Paul is saying to the Corinthians about confessing Lord Jesus Christ.[5] Until that moment, that dark and most tragic of moments which began in earnest in the Garden of Gethsemane, God the Father had had a great deal to say to and about his Son, Jesus, about his identity, his ministry, and his intimate eternal relationship with the Father. And Jesus himself repeatedly affirmed that he spoke and acted for God his Father (John 5, John 10). He identified his own will (John 6:38), his own teaching (John 7:16), his own works (John 9:4), and his own words (John 14:24) with his Father, so that to reject Jesus is to reject God, as we read in Luke 10.

In this important but highly nuanced respect (but not in others), Jesus' claims are not self-authenticating inasmuch as God the Father repeatedly bears public, verbal witness to God the Son throughout his ministry. God the Father bears witness to Jesus that what Jesus says and does is true ("The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me," John 5:37). Reading the Gospels we encounter the Father, over and over throughout Jesus' ministry, bearing witness to the Son in various ways. Even Jesus' miracles performed in John 5 and in John 10 are themselves the testimony of the Father that "this is my Son." We remember, of course, that it was the Father's voice from heaven formally inaugurating the Son's public

[5] On this and other points I survey below, see McFarland, "The Ecstatic God," 335-46. Note, however, that McFarland takes his observations in a direction reflective of the Christology of Moltmann and others, in which the cross is a moment of rupture between the Father and the Son characterized as the death of God, whereas I am persuaded the relevant texts carry the opposite significance.

ministry in the context of Jesus' baptism with the words: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." At Jesus's transfiguration, again the Father says the very same words and adds the command, "Listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). As Jesus' ministry reaches its climax, God the Father speaks yet once more in John 12 as he communes with his troubled Son. Jesus reflects on their conversation. "Now my soul is troubled and what should I say? Should I say, Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then we read that a voice sounded from heaven: "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." We read that some of the crowd who were there and heard what was going on said, "This is thunder." Others said, "an angel spoke to him," but Jesus replies to them all, "It wasn't for my sake, but for yours that this voice spoke" (John 12:27-30).

Did not the Father's voice speak a lot in Jesus' ministry? From the Jordan, saying "this is my beloved Son," to now on the very verge of Gethsemane and Golgotha, over and over again, the Father has borne public and verbal witness to the Son. "This is my Son. This is the Messiah. This is the one I have sent. Listen to him."

Now, on Good Friday, when Jesus approaches Jerusalem for the final time to be arrested, tried, and executed as a criminal, as he proceeds from his knees in Gethsemane to hanging on the tree, we lean in and wait to read about the heavenly voice we fully expect to protest *now*, to declare the truth *now*, even to shake the ground and the people walking on it with that truth *now*. But what do we hear? We hear nothing. When that dark "hour" of Jesus begins in earnest, the voice from heaven suddenly goes silent. When the Son is struggling faithfully with the destiny that lies before him, one that isolates him even from his nearest and dearest but weary and unsure disciples, when he asks the Father about the possibility of a passing rather than an imbibed cup, the Father does not again fill and shatter the void with his assuring and affirming voice. The Son addresses his Father in prayer, yes, but the Father, in Matthew 26, does not answer.

Has the wordy God gone mute? Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of this Jesus, like the false idols? Is this not the most important time for God the Father to speak? Surely he cannot remain silent, perhaps with a blank divine stare, saying nothing. Surely he is not like the Apostle's acquaintances who, in the face of great Philippian need, were preoccupied with their own interests and were not one-souled with Paul in heartbroken concern for the people of God (Phil. 2:20-21). It is easy to imagine the reader of the Gospels leaning in to say, "Say something! Now is the time!" Does not the validity of all of Jesus' claims depend on the witness of the Father *now*, in connection with *this* horrific moment?

Yes, it does.

Would not God's silence *now*, in this darkest of hours, suggest to some that maybe he had changed his mind about Jesus, that he had abandoned Jesus?

It might.

And for many, that is precisely what it means. "Jesus is accursed," they conclude. Initially, even his own disciples seemed to have interpreted these events that way, according to Luke 24.

The phenomenon of silence is a profound mystery of human life. Silence can signal rest and peace, or owe itself to profound unrest and disturbance, especially when it is the silence of waiting for resolution, for a redemptive breaking of an empty, deathly quiet. Silence can thus be ironically eloquent as a testimony that things are *not* well. Simon & Garfunkel's famous song, "The Sound of Silence," tells us "silence like a cancer grows." Poet Alice Walker, encountering the horrors of events in Rwanda, the Eastern Congo, and the Middle East, titled her dark essay wrestling with these atrocities *Overcoming Speechlessness*. The gifted but often troubled philosopher, Simone Weil, organized a collection of essays in which she wrestled with the relationship of human life to the Christian God, and called her collection, *Waiting for God*. Tomáš Halík was a psychotherapist working under the twentieth-century communist regime in Czechoslovakia who was also secretly ordained as a priest in service of the underground Church. In that context he wrote similarly of faith, hope, and love as the forms of "patience with God" in the face of his apparent silence, which the world confuses with his death. No wonder silence has long had a cherished place in Christian spirituality. In his work, *Silence: A Christian History*, historian Diarmaid MacCulloch suggested that silence can serve as a lens through which we can appreciate many of the successes, failures, and challenges in the Church's history.

Silence of this sort begs for resolution. And yet, God is in fact not silent for long. But how does God now speak his affirming word regarding Jesus? "He raises him from the dead!," we reply. Yes, but we must not stop there. If Jesus' death includes, as it were, the momentary "death" (as silence) of that *affirming voice* of the Father that had been saying repeatedly "This is my son. Listen to him," then we begin to understand the remarkable implications of what Paul says at the beginning of Romans in 1:4, that this same Jesus was confirmed as the Son of God with power according to *the Spirit of holiness* in his resurrection from the dead. As the same Apostle says elsewhere in 1 Timothy 3:15, in the act of the resurrection from the dead Jesus is vindicated *by the Spirit*. Why is mention of the Spirit, specifically, apparently important for Paul in this context? Why not refer simply to the vindicating power of God as such? I suggest that the apostle is convinced

that the resurrection of Jesus that follows the darkness of Golgotha and the continued silence of Holy Saturday, the silence in between the cross and the empty tomb, is the climactic event of the Father's words first given at the Jordan: "See, this *is* my beloved son," and this is connected in some way to the Spirit specifically. The resurrection is an act of divine identification and vindication of the Son by the Father in and through the Spirit.

We may pose the matter this way. In the resurrection, the Father speaks afresh, yes. But who is the "associated" speaker who, by the resurrection of the Son, says, with the Father and to all, "this is Lord Jesus Christ"? *By whom* does the Father speak confirmatively in resurrection? The Spirit. *The Spirit, we may say, is–among other things, to be sure–the divine eloquence at work in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.*

The apostle's central concern now emerges into view for the Corinthians and for us. The Spirit is the wordy witness to the death-defying power of the love between the Father and the Son. The grave could not hold the Son because the Son is righteous, it is true. But it is also true, from another angle, that the grave could not sever the love of the Father for the righteous Son, the love of the Father to which the Son had repeatedly pointed in his earthly ministry. The Spirit serves as the ultimate guarantor and witness for both the divine oneness of Father and Son and also of their fellowship, their *harmonious* unity. In bearing witness to Jesus in his resurrection from the dead, which is the central content of the Spirit's testimony, the things the Spirit says are therefore unsurprisingly the same as the Father's: "Jesus is Lord and there is no other God than the one proclaimed by and revealed through this One."

The Self-Effacing Spirit

Hearing this, we remember things we might have forgotten, particularly that Jesus himself had told us about what the Spirit would do in these very terms. Indeed, this is who the Spirit is and always has been. The foundational importance of the divine processions illuminates the rich beauty of this truth of the divine economy: the One who, proceeding eternally from the Father and the Son, speaks not of himself but of the Father and the Son, is the One who is always pointing, as it were, away from himself and to them. He is the clandestine, self-effacing Spirit who is discovered principally in his acts of disclosing the Father and the Son, going before and behind the Son in history, conforming the Bride to the glory of that Son through fellowship with him. To "find" and "hear" the Spirit, we attend to the works and words of the Father and the Son. He speaks of them, refers to them, glorifies them, is "all about" them, not himself.

He has been the self-effacing Spirit from the beginning. In the Gospels, we learn that the Holy Spirit is—long before the resurrection of Jesus—a kind of "advance guard" for the mission of the Son.[6] At every point the Spirit confirms that the course of Jesus' ministry, even his being rejected by his kinsmen, is not only consistent with God's will but a confirmation of who Jesus really is. It was the Spirit who was operative in Jesus long before the baptism event as the Son was "incarnate by the Holy Spirit" in the Virgin's womb, as we confess in the Creed and read in Matthew 1 and Luke 1. That Spirit also comes upon Jesus at his baptism in Matthew 1, and drives him immediately afterwards into the wilderness to be tempted in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. It is the Spirit whose power Jesus claims for his mighty deeds in Matthew 12, and whom he promises will one day come to lead his disciples into all the truth–and to confess that truth in words he gives–after the ascension in John 16:13. And at the crucifixion, that scene that brought us into this question in the first place, when Jesus dies yet again the Spirit goes on ahead of him, present in power on the far side of the cross to raise Jesus from the dead (1 Peter 3).

The Spirit had been the one who went before the Son as he hovered over creation's waters, spoke through the prophets, went before Israel in a pillar of fire and cloud, filled and empowered judges and kings and prophets, inhabited tent and temple. He was in these various ways already going before Jesus. Now, after Good Friday, he has Jesus follow him as he goes before him, to raise him from the dead on Easter morning. Jesus, therefore, when he repeatedly confesses the Father throughout his earthly ministry, discloses the trinitarian bond that includes the Spirit "confessing" Jesus. If the mission of Jesus is to confess the Father even unto death, the Spirit's ministry is to confess Jesus as the Father's beloved Son even beyond that death. In fact, we should see the act of resurrection itself as an act of *divine* confession and not merely as historical evidence of Jesus' divinity: it is the eloquence of the Father raising the Son in and by the witnessing and enlivening Spirit—a threefold act of unimpeachable testimony.

But we have not yet explained what this has to do with the Church's confession of Lord Jesus Christ.

The Divine Duet: Confessing With the Spirit

The resurrection of Jesus Christ by and in the Spirit is at least a chief aspect of the affirming, confirming voice of God that we were all waiting for at the

[6] McFarland, "The Ecstatic God," 341.

cross in the silence that troubled us. But now we recall that the risen Jesus promised to give that same Spirit to his disciples, the apostolic foundation of the Church of which he is himself the cornerstone. To what end? For *their own* ongoing testimony to the world at large, as we read in Acts 1 and John 1, which has in view their "posterity," the Church to be built on their faithful testimony. Jesus confirms that the Spirit's witness that has been inseparable from his own witness to the Father is going to be inseparable from the witness of his people as well, giving gracious rise to the Church's own eloquence in the divine proclamation: "This One is the Lord!"

These observations put us in a position to appreciate the place of the Church's confessional life within the nexus of attesting Father, risen and ascended Son, and witnessing Spirit, a nexus which constitutes the Church's identity in the period between the resurrection of the Son and the resurrection of his Body. She is the Body blessed with the Spirit who gives voice, *not in isolation but within and through the Church,* to the divine declaration: "Jesus is not accursed; he is the Lord."[7] Jesus was raised in the power of the Spirit whose work of witnessing to the Son continuously takes place through confessing human beings, the Church, who are gathered by that Spirit from the ends of the earth to give voice to this sacred duet of creedal affirmation. At the very end of canonical Scripture, among the very last words we find in Revelation 22, what do we read? "The Spirit and the Bride say, come." The Spirit, not the Father, not the Son. And yet not the Spirit alone, but "the Spirit *and the Bride say*"—a sacred duet in the act of confession and commendation of Lord Jesus Christ. In a duet of divine origin through a historical people, the voice rings out, "Come! Come to this One. This is the One. Living water is here. Life is here. Come now to the One who will himself come again." And so John responds, "Even so, come Lord Jesus!"

In the wonder of God's grace, an imperfect and sinful people spanning space and time are inhabited by the eloquent Spirit of God and brought, as it were, into his own eloquence in saying with him, "Jesus is Lord," vindicating Jesus before the world and commending him to one another. Such a confession does not come from below, but only from above. Paul famously says elsewhere, in Romans 8:9, that this includes what we say of the Father, inasmuch as it is only by virtue of the Spirit that human beings can call God "Abba."

The Spirit's work of gathering the Church from near and far accounts for the biblical affirmations that this Church is known by this and

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[7] On the corporate and ecclesial nature of this act of confession, see "Confessing Between the Lines: Relating Scripture, Church, and Creed," above.

distinguished from counterfeits by this, namely, that she confesses "Jesus is Lord." No one can say that, says Paul to the Corinthians, except by the Spirit, *because this is what the Spirit says.* Because this is who the Spirit is, because this is what the Spirit says, you can find the Church by that confession. To be sure there's more to say: in 2,000 years we have often needed to explain what we mean by "Jesus is Lord." Nevertheless, for all of our theological development and sophistication, we will never outgrow the simplicity and profundity of that core confession: Lord Jesus Christ.

Nor is this an example of a disordered preoccupation with Paul alone. In 1 John 2, the apostle John similarly addresses a problem of Christological heresy and says to the Church in words that will now resonate with us, "But you," he says, "have been anointed by the Holy One," that is, the Holy Spirit. "You have been anointed by the Holy One and you have all knowledge. Who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also." And then in verse 24, "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us–eternal life." John confirms that Paul's argument is not unique to him, but an apostolic conviction. He affirms that what the Church "heard from the beginning," which approximates our language of the authentic "tradition," arises not from the vicissitudes of mere human history but from the reality of trinitarian life and finds living, "abiding," trinitarian expression within the voice of the Church: in the Holy Spirit who anoints unto a faithful confession, we confess rather than deny Jesus as the Christ, and thus affirm and possess both the Son and the Father.

A Concluding Note

The confession at the heart of the gospel and of the Church's identity and life—"Jesus is Lord!"—is therefore a confession that only comes from the Spirit who proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, and who thus bears glorious and eloquent witness to the Father and the Son. This eloquence consisted in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, breaking the silence that funded the doubts and rejections of Good Friday and Holy Saturday. And that eloquence continues now to echo and reverberate through the corridors of the Church's story, powerfully bearing witness to Jesus Christ as the Lord, for the Spirit fills the Church, the glorious Body of the Son, with this same fulsome declaration, "Jesus is Lord." To have this confession is to have far more than mere words. It is more than being

traditional, more than getting your I's dotted and your T's crossed, more than having some apologetic or evangelistic tool. It is, says John, to have the "received words" abiding in us, which words originate in the effusive Spirit himself. This is, in part, what having the Spirit looks like. It is nothing less than to be graciously woven into the Trinitarian glory of the Father's "wordy" love for his Son and the Son's "wordy" love for his Father who in the Spirit love each other perfectly and, yes, eloquently.

What an honor it is to be folded into such love by the confession the Spirit gives voice to within the Body, the Church. This, then, ultimately, is what is happening when the Church confesses Lord Jesus Christ. "I don't want you to be uninformed," Paul tells the Corinthians. "The true God is not mute. He's in fact very wordy and he is eloquent, and his eloquence is the Spirit of the resurrection and vindication of Christ at work in you who confess the creed 'Lord Jesus Christ,'—not because you're mere traditionalists, not because you can't come up with something yourself, not because you like old and old-sounding words, but because the Spirit is at work in you, the Body, to join you with himself in the glorious declaration 'Lord Jesus Christ.'"

In this light, we might find ourselves in a better position to understand why the Church has always taken so seriously the minutiae of Christological teaching, and why she has believed the stakes to be so high in doing so. Ever since Easter morning, continuing through Nicaea and Constantinople and Chalcedon, and for many centuries since, the Church has guarded and commended what we must conclude is the greatest sacred honor conceivable: to add the voice of the Bride to the eloquence of the Spirit in glory of the Father and the Son, and thus to say, to the world and to another, "Come! Come to the Lord Jesus Christ! And, Jesus, do come quickly." This gift we also recognize as a solemn and joyful summons to worship, ministry, evangelism, and confession, so that more and more might be added to the innumerable choir of faithful confessors of Lord Jesus Christ until that day when, as Paul says to the Philippians, every knee will bow and *every tongue will confess* (2:10-11).

Confess what? "Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Isn't that just like the Spirit to do?

11. The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Baptized, and Forgiven

Harrison Perkins

Why does the Nicene Creed include the Church with mention of baptism and forgiveness of sin? We might presume that it merely follows the Apostles' Creed, since that shorter statement includes "the holy catholic church" among our faith's essential articles.[1] Although certainly true that the Nicene Creed emulated that earlier affirmation, the primary concern in composing this document was to uphold orthodox trinitarian doctrine. Accordingly, the Athanasian Creed has no parallel about ecclesiology, even while furthering the same cause. Our ecumenical creeds, therefore, do not *necessarily* discuss the Church just because of historical precedent in the antecedent creeds. Within its defense of the Christian view of one God in three persons, some reason undergirds the Nicene Creed's inclusion of the more elaborate affirmation that "I believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church" with an acknowledgement of "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." Although, as addressed below, the Novatian and Donatist heresies likely form a crucial background to explain why a statement about the Church was historically relevant within the Nicene Creed, the Creed's internal logic also suggests greater significance as the Church is how the triune God draws us into his own life.

This chapter explores the theological significance of Nicaea's affirmation about the Church. By considering the placement of the articles about the Church, we see that the Church is a truly theological reality. It is the product of the triune God's saving work being brought to bear in creation by the Spirit's power. The Church's fourfold attributes of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are products of Christ's presence by the Spirit. Baptism signifies our entry into this Spirit-wrought community where we receive forgiveness of sin because we are joined to Christ by faith alone. Our main payoff is that our life in the Church is God's way of bringing us into communion with him by faith on account of Christ's saving work.

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, creedal and confessional quotations come from Chad Van Dixhoorn (ed.), *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022). Any italics are added emphasis.

Situating the Question

Research on the Nicene Creed has rightly focused on the debates about trinitarian theology that shaped this document. Investigation into the theology proper that grew from the councils and problems that produced what we have as the Nicene Creed has flourished in recent years.[2] This scholarship has concentrated on issues in trinitarian development, leaving some of the other Nicene affirmations relatively unexamined.

Nicene ecclesiology has then been mostly out of the spotlight. Most literature about the pro-Nicene tradition has (understandably) emphasized the same issues of divine essence and personhood as they took center stage in the development of the Nicene Creed at the councils and in the later debates about the Spirit's procession from the Father and from the Son.[3] Even excellent theological expositions of the Nicene Creed have given disproportionately little attention to the article on the Church.[4]

Despite that gap in research, the Creed's affirmation about the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, coupled to a declaration about one baptism for sin's forgiveness, had to carry theological significance. The Creed's textual history testifies that it was not there simply as a holdover from the Apostles' Creed. After all, the version produced in 325 AD at the Council of Nicaea ended simply, "And in the Holy Ghost." In 381 AD, the Council of Constantinople gave us the final form of the Creed (technically the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), which expanded the closing section to say:

> And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In the one holy catholic and apostolic

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2 E.g. John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: Formation of Christian Theology, Volume 1* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); John Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Formation of Christian Theology, Volume 2* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004); Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

3 For extensive historical treatment about the Spirit's procession, see A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4 E.g. Phillip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023), 195–97; cf. the Roman Catholic perspective in Jared Ortiz and Daniel A. Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 172–93.

> 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.[5]

This revision elaborated greatly upon the specific issue of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the earlier Nicene teaching merely affirmed basic belief in the Spirit, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan teaching extrapolated more about his person and work. The expansion particularly about the Spirit, properly speaking, represents a statement affirming the Spirit's full deity in response to debates that arose after the first version of the Creed, written in 325 AD, and the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.[6] Still, why the addition about the Church?

This textual development of the Creed's affirmations about the Spirit suggests something of how we should understand its statements about the Church, baptism, and forgiveness. In the expanded Creed, the Church fits within the additions focused on the Spirit's work. Hence, we ought to locate the Church as part of our creedal heritage about the Spirit himself.

The Church as the Outpost of the Triune God

The above considerations force us to think about why the Creed places its affirmations about the Church, baptism, and forgiveness where it does. This development in creedal expansion coheres with some of the crucial advancements in trinitarian theology. We can recognize this relation by comparing the Apostles' Creed with the Nicene. These forward steps in the ecumenical principles for explaining theology proper helped shape the explanation of ecclesiology and soteriology too.

The Apostles' Creed sets a baseline intersection in the topics of the Spirit, the Church, and salvation. In the Apostle's Creed, the simple statements run together terse affirmations of the Spirit's person, the Church, and salvation. These closing articles read:

> I believe in the Holy Spirit;
> the holy catholic church;
> the communion of saints;
> the forgiveness of sins;
> the resurrection of the body;
> and the life everlasting. Amen.

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5 For these text critical differences, see Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vol. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 1:29, 2:59; Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 212–13.

6 Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 146–49.

The notable feature for our consideration is how quickly the Apostles' Creed places two affirmations about the Church directly after its confession of the Holy Spirit. Although inferential, we should remember that Christians have always seen baptism as the sign marking the communion of saints, which brings some correlation between the line that follows the assertion of the Church in each creed. The implication is seemingly that the Church is the primary work that we should associate with the Spirit, and that the blessings of salvation follow from our experience in the Church where the Spirit works through God's means of grace—Word, sacrament, and prayer—to create, confirm, and cultivate faith in Jesus Christ.

The Nicene Creed adds layers to what was previously said about the whole relationship of the Spirit and the Church. The most important aspect in this regard is how this later Creed gives more extensive explanation to the Spirit's person and general work before making the same transition to outline the Church and salvation as the Apostles' Creed had done. In both creeds, the Church is connected to the Spirit's work, which shapes our understanding of the Church. Before turning to that point, we need to mark one more important point about this creedal development.

The Nicene Creed's expansion about the Spirit's work adds more buffer between the assertions of the Spirit and the Church than in the Apostles' Creed. Most notably, Nicaea brings the Father and the Son back into the discussion to explain their relation to the Spirit's person within the Godhead. Bringing the whole picture of the triune God back into the discussion highlights one of the important considerations in the doctrine of God from the fourth century's burgeoning pro-Nicene tradition.

The Church can in one way be considered a work directly of the Spirit, and in another way a work of the triune God. This issue involves the doctrines of inseparable operations and of divine appropriations.[7] On one hand, the doctrine of inseparable operations recognizes that because Father, Son, and Spirit are *one* God, God's external works cannot be divided as if the Father or the Son or the Spirit could act without the others. All three divine persons are involved in every external work.

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[7] For historical and theological exposition of these doctrines, see Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 296–300; Adonis Vidu, *The Same God who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations and Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); Scott R. Swain, "Three Agents, One Agency: The Undivided External Works of the Trinity," in Matthew Barrett (ed.), *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024), 504–22; Josh Malone, "Trinity and Appropriations: Meaning, Practice, and Significance," in *On Classical Trinitarianism*, 523–44.

On the other hand, the doctrine of divine appropriations reckons with how we, aligned with the biblical data, associate particular works most closely with one divine person. For example, Father, Son, and Spirit all perform the work of the incarnation (in some way or other), but only the Son became incarnate.[8] As another instance, all three persons together created the universe, but we most closely associate this work with the Father.[9] These doctrines work in tandem to balance what must be said about the unity of God's works with the obvious connotations of specific works with a particular divine person.

The upshot provides a dual emphasis for a trinitarian and a pneumatological lens for the Church and our participation in it. From the trinitarian vantage, namely through inseparable operations as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son, the Church is the work of the triune God. The Father gathers a people by redeeming them in Christ and drawing them to Christ through the Spirit. The Church, as in all things, comes from the Father through the Son by the Spirit. From the pneumatological vantage, the Church is a work appropriated to the Spirit. Just as the Creed describes creation in close conjunction with the Father, it relates the articles on the Church and salvation just under the section on the Spirit.[10] The placement's purpose is to show that the Spirit brings about the Church and that the Church is the premier location of the Spirit's redemptive work. The triune God brings his work to bear most pointedly in the Church.

Despite how the controversies contemporary with the Council of Nicaea (325) and Council of Constantinople (381) swirled around trinitarian issues, this affirmation about the Church and her attributes fittingly belongs to the Nicene Creed. Yes, it follows and expands the traditional material of the creedal heritage.[11] It also situates our doctrines of the Church and salvation in their proper dogmatic location. John Webster (1955–2016) reminded us that the theological enterprise should be just an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, both God's life and works.[12] In one sense, "to expound the doctrine of the Trinity in its full scope is to expound the

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8 Vidu, *Same God who Works All Things*, 158–216.

9 Vidu, *Same God who Works All Things*, 126–57.

10 Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 6–7.

11 Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 172.

12 John Webster, "*Rector et Iudex Super Genera Doctrinarum?* The Place of the Doctrine of Justification," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 159–61; John Webster, "'It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him': Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," *God without Measure I*, 143–57.

entirety of Christian dogmatics."[13] This comprehensiveness means that "The object of Christian theology is twofold: God the Holy Trinity and all other things relative to God."[14] As the Nicene Creed reminds us, the Church is not God but stands in the closest relation to God. It is a product of the triune God's saving activity. In the words of Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), "The true order of the Creed demanded that the Church be subjoined to the Trinity, as the house to Him who dwells in it, the temple to God who occupies it, and the city to its builder."[15] The Church is the triune God's outpost of redemption on earth.

The Church as the Spirit's Crater of Grace

We can get some insight into the creedal ascription of those fourfold attributes to the Church, along with the affirmation of baptism and forgiveness, by reflecting further upon this connection of the Spirit's work in the Church. Although our focus in this chapter is specifically the Church, we cannot rightly understand what the Church is, especially as formulated in our creedal statement, without seeing its relation to God himself. The Church is an institution. It is not, however, a human institution. Rather, it is the mark on earth left from the Spirit's work to bring the redemption that Christ has won for his people to bear upon them in history.

The Church then has an intimate connection to our understanding of God the Spirit's work for Christ's people. As T. F. Torrance expounded our line from the Creed, "If we believe in the Holy Spirit, we also believe in the existence of one Church in the one Spirit. Belief in 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church' is thus regarded in the Creed as a function of belief in the Spirit or rather of belief in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[16] A right understanding of the Spirit leaves us, not with a churchless Christianity, but with a full-throated trinitarian affirmation of the Church. Hence, right ecclesiology derives from our doctrine of the Spirit since the Church is a

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13 Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 159.

14 John Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?," *Journal of Analytical Theology* 3 (2015): 17; also John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 142–48. See Tyler Wittman, "John Webster on the Task of a Properly Theological *Theologia*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2020): 97–111.

15 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, §56 in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 1/14*. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 3:255; Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 173.

16 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1997), 252.

sovereign act of the Spirit, who is the Lord and Giver of life.[17] The Church is the location where the Spirit works to create Christ's body, granting life by the gospel.[18] The Church is the place where the Spirit applies Christ's saving work—summed up in the Creed by the forgiveness of sins.

These connections are hardly mere theological inferences foisted upon the Creed. They grow directly from the deep structures of Scripture. Paul concentrates these points in Ephesians 4:1–16 (ESV):

> I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says,
>
> "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
> and he gave gifts to men."
>
> (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

This passage contains several features that warrant our attention to reinforce our notion of the Church as the primary redemptive work of the Spirit.

First, the whole passage is concerned with unity among believers. Paul's moral exhortation culminates in the admonition that Christians be "eager to maintain *the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace." Paul stressed this theme as he repeated how Christians are joined through *one* of

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[17] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, 1–2.

[18] Cary, *Nicene Creed*, 195.

numerous spiritual realities. The ascended Christ poured out gifts precisely so that "we all attain to *the unity* of the faith." Our growth further into Christ cannot be disconnected from how we are "joined and held together" in him for the sake of "working properly" as his body.

Some problems within the ancient church show why pro-Nicene theologians would feel the need to build this biblical concern into their Creed. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) wrote prolifically against the Novatian heresy that had wreaked havoc through the Church concerning valid membership and baptism.[19] He recognized that the reality about the unity of the Spirit means that we also must be joined to the Church, explaining, "Whoever dissociates himself from the Church is joined to a counterfeit paramour, he is cut off from the promises of Christ, and neither will he who abandons Christ's Church attain to Christ's rewards ... He cannot have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his Mother."[20] Pulling no punches, he concluded, "there is no salvation outside the Church."[21] Cyprian's arguments for the Church's unity, holiness, and catholicity against *divisions* caused by heretical doctrine resulting in splits among Christ's body grounds a rationale to enshrine basic ecclesiological commitments at the creedal level.[22] The intervening years between the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople saw the Donatist controversy increase in north Africa, wherein Augustine had to argue that the Church causes its members' holiness, not vice versa.[23] This heightened ecclesiological controversy would further explain the need for the later expansion of the Nicene Creed about the nature of the Church.

The Reformation aligns with patristic theologians in seeing this biblical point as an ecumenical necessity. No less than in Cyprian's day, the Reformation period saw problems with divisions, especially as Protestants

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19 For the best collection of these ecclesiological works, see St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Treatises*, trans. Allen Brent (Popular Patristics Series; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006); St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Letters*, trans. Allen Brent (Popular Patristics Series; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006).

20 Cyprian of Carthage, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, §6, in *On the Church: Select Treatises*, 157.

21 Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter 73* (Cyprian to Iubaianus), §21.2, in *On the Church: Select Letters*, 211. This letter has elsewhere been numbered as epistle 72; Epistle LXXII, §21, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vol. (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 5:384. The resolution to this discrepancy in these numerations is not clear. This issue is flagged here for the sake of those pursuing the citation.

22 See also the issues raised in Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 175–77.

23 Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 180–82.

navigated what grounded their catholic unity among various camps who no longer had communion as one institutional Church. Hence, Reformed confessions furthered the same patristic and creedal concern for the Church's necessity. Belgic Confession 28 affirms: "We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and *there is no salvation apart from it*, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition." Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2 follows suit, arguing that the visible Church is "the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*." The Church as an institution is the center of Christian unity. Accordingly, the Nicene Creed says that the Church is *one*, since the Body of Christ is where Christians are joined to their one head, Jesus himself.

Second, this unity is "the unity of the Spirit" because the Spirit is its author. Paul's exhortation concerned the deeper unity of spiritual empowerment, not mere agreement. This Spirit-wrought unity surpasses that mere voluntary association of many free gatherings. It pertains to our previous point that the Spirit has truly bound Christ's people together in a real way. He does that work by tying us together as Christ's body, namely as the Church with its institutional nature and membership structures. The Spirit's work is inextricable from how he works in the Church. These first two points have shown that Nicene affirmation that the Church is "one" flows directly from the Spirit's fruit of binding the Church together.

Third, the spiritual realities of belonging to God by faith unto salvation are intimately bound to life in the Church. Paul made that clear in the connection of "one body and one Spirit" so that Church and Spirit have a direct relation. The "one hope" coming from our "one Lord" and "one faith" are tied to our "one baptism," signifying our attachment to the "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Torrance pulls together these threads, concluding, "The Church is what it everywhere is in the world as a manifestation of the saving union with God incarnate in Jesus Christ."[24] This third point then shows, as we confess in the Creed's second attribute for the Church, that the Church is holy precisely as a fruit of the Spirit's work in binding us to Christ, the truly holy one.[25] This faith union with Christ comes to its first expression in being part of the Church. As Paul explicitly noted, and the Creed affirms, that participation in Christ's people is sealed by our inclusion in the community through baptism.

Fourth, by the Spirit's power the ascended Christ uses the Church to bind us to himself. This connection follows right on the heels of our third

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[24] Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 253.

[25] Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 253–54.

point, extending it in showing the relation of Christ to the Spirit's work in the Church. As Christ ascended into heaven after rising from the dead, "he gave gifts to men." By those gifts, Paul explained that Jesus "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." We see that Christ's gifts were church officers who equip the saints, do the work of ministry, and build up Christ's body.[26] In other words, Christ's gifts were staple features of the institutional Church. Jesus' plan to funnel the Spirit's work from himself in heaven to his people on earth was then to establish the ordinary ways of doing ministry in the Church. Christ's purposes to work in this way are exactly what explain the intimate bond between the Spirit and the Church.

The Reformed tradition, growing from this ancient affirmation in the Nicene Creed, has continued to see that the Church is the place where Christ by the Spirit provides salvation. The Creed's order reflects this reality as it places the Church as the Spirit's first work, quickly followed by the statement about baptism and forgiveness of sin. Interestingly, Westminster Larger Catechism 62–90 approximately follows the Creed's order in placing its discussion of the visible Church directly after its treatment of Christ's work, then followed by an explanation of the benefits of salvation. Reading between the lines, the Westminster Larger Catechism lacks a direct affirmation about the Spirit only because it so closely associates him with his work in and through the Church.

The confessional trajectory codified these aspects of how the Spirit relates to the Church by explaining the ordinary means of grace. This intersection expresses in Reformed categories the Creed's relationship of the Spirit to the Church, baptism (being a placeholder of sorts for all Christ's ordinances), and forgiveness of sins (standing for all the benefits of salvation). Westminster Larger Catechism 154–185 brings this issue full circle by detailing how Word, sacrament, and prayer are "the outward and ordinary means whereby *Christ communicates to his church* the benefits of his mediation...all which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation" (WLC 154). The Church is again the location of the Spirit's work as "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means" of bringing sinners to salvation by faith alone and strengthening them in it (WLC 155). These themes come directly together in the sacraments as they "become effectual means of salvation, not by any power in themselves, or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of

[26] On this issue, see T. David Gordon, "'Equipping' Ministry in Ephesians 4," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 no. 1 (March 1994): 69–78.

him by whom they are administered, but only *by the working of the Holy Ghost, and the blessing of Christ*, by whom they are instituted" (WLC 161). This Spirit-wrought efficacy certainly pertains to how we understand the Nicene statement of "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" since we can see how only Christ's blessing by the Spirit's power brings salvation to bear *through* the means of grace, including the sacraments. The means of grace do have a true, divine instrumentality, but not in themselves as if their efficacy can be detached from Christ, faith, and holy Scripture.[27] On the premise that prayer also is an *outward* means of grace belonging first to the Church as such, the same holds true in that prayer must be offered "by the help of his Spirit" (WLC 178). The means of grace are all Spirit-empowered aspects of church life that deliver spiritual realities to Christ's people.

For Protestants, especially within the Reformed tradition, the Church's inherent connection to the Spirit grounds how we can rest satisfied that our churches truly manifest particularly the marks of unity and catholicity. Because of its claim to (exclusive) institutional continuity, the Roman communion has long criticized Protestant churches as lacking these attributes, since we are not joined to them especially via the bishop of Rome.[28] Although the institutional Church is absolutely indispensable, as is membership in it, the source of these attributes is not mere institutional alignment. Rather, the Spirit himself, present in the Church, is the source of the Church's attributes. In this respect, the Reformed follow Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 200 AD) when he established this connection: "where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth."[29] As the Spirit works through Christ's appointed means to make Christ present by the Spirit amidst his people, the Church comes into existence and into possession of its necessary attributes.

The Church is then the place where Christ's Spirit brings grace home through the outward means that Christ appointed for us to know him and to encounter him in grace. God gives his Spirit to us through his outward ordinances (Gal. 3:2–3; 1 Tim. 1:14).[30] The Church is the crater of the Spirit's application of Christ's grace as he brings it to bear upon his people on earth.

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27 On this issue of instrumentality, see Harrison Perkins, "Sacraments as Signs, Seals, and Means of Grace: A Guided Tour of Seventeenth-Century Catechisms in England," *Modern Reformation* 32 no. 3 (May/June 2023): 18–27.

28 For an irenic example, see Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 180–81.

29 Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts, rev. ed. (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus Company, 2019), 3.24.1.

30 James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie* (London, 1645), 39[5] (this edition's incorrect pagination reads 391).

The Apostolic Ground of the Church's Catholicity

Just as the Spirit is the source of the Church's unity and holiness, his work as the One who has spoken by the prophets grounds her catholicity and apostolicity in close relation to one another as well. The Church's catholicity is as much part of her mission as an attribute. Just prior to his ascension, Christ issued the Great Commission to the Apostles. In Matthew 28:18–20, he instructed them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This mandate grounds the Church's position as a universal institution as well as its instruction to grow into a universal institution.[31]

This catholicity also resides in the same principles as we have seen grounded in Nicene biblical reasoning above. The inclusion of all nations, a universality that imbues catholicity to the Church, is manifested by *baptism* into God's *triune* name. The Nicene affirmation of the Church's catholicity is bound to the confession of the Spirit as the Giver of life and followed by the acknowledgment of baptism for sins' forgiveness because Scripture itself presents the Church's universality as part of the triune God's work through baptism.

This catholicity is rooted further in Scripture itself as the infallible apostolic witness. True apostolicity grounds the Church's catholicity because God's household is founded upon the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19–21).[32] The true one, holy, catholic Church is present everywhere that apostolicity resides. True apostolicity, however, springs from adherence to holy Scripture. Irenaeus explains, "We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."[33] The Gospel came from the apostles and continues to be known to the Church through the pillar of our faith, namely holy Scripture.

Reformed churches have received this truth in emphasizing the Church's practice. Belgic Confession 29 explains, "The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: the church engages in the pure

31 Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 184.
32 Ortiz and Keating, *Nicene Creed*, 186.
33 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1 (ANF 1:426–9).

preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church disciplines for correcting faults." Our adherence to the apostolic faith comes in our allegiance to the apostolic witness and practice as preserved and propagated in holy Scripture. True apostolicity comes from the Spirit's provision in God's inspired Word, which then grounds our catholicity as the true Church exists everywhere that apostolicity manifests.

Since the Nicene article is terse and unelaborate, we will not delve deeply into the details of how forgiveness of sins works. Reformed churches have received this creedal affirmation and expounded its implications through our insistence upon justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.[34] This salvation, however, rests upon Christ's work to fulfill the law on our behalf and to satisfy the curse of God's justice due to our sin. By faith, we take hold of Christ to receive this new standing with God (Rom. 5:1). By that same faith, Christ continues to work in us by the Spirit to conform us to his image (Rom. 8:29–30). The recovery and exposition of these grand truths of salvation are some of the Reformation's greatest accomplishments. Nevertheless, the Reformed remained equally committed to the truth that God brings the elect to faith and applies Christ's benefits to them by the Spirit's power through the Church's work in the ordinary means of grace.

Conclusion: Church Membership and Means of Grace Ministry

This winding theological tour of the Nicene Creed's articles about the "one holy catholic and apostolic church" joined with "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" has tried to highlight the biblical, theological, and historical reasons for seeing the triune God's saving work as coming to bear upon his people through the Church. The import is that the Church is where God is at work by the Spirit to bring salvation through the means of grace. Those big-picture theological issues need more concrete pastoral application.

First, Christians need to realize that God provides care for them primarily through the Church. We must value church membership and join ourselves to a local congregation.[35] The notion of churchless Christianity

[34] For extensive explanation of the Spirit's role in soteriology specifically in connection to the Nicene Creed, see J. V. Fesko, *The Giver of Life: The Biblical Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Salvation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024).

[35] For an excellent introduction to church membership, see Jonathan Landry Cruse, *Church Membership* (Blessings of the Faith; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2024).

is a lie that coheres neither with Scripture nor the ecumenical tradition of understanding Scripture. In a special way, God works for us, upon us, and through us by our participation in the Church. The Spirit creates the Church, draws the borders around it through baptism, and conveys Christ's blessings to us in the Church. We must be part of the Church to live faithfully before God.

Second, pastors need to see the value of means-of-grace, Word-and-sacrament ministry. So many modern churches have embraced a program-driven approach to ministry, focusing on activities, entertainment, busyness, and infrastructure. Scripture and the ecumenical tradition emphasize that the Spirit "spoke by the prophets" and applies salvation through the means of grace. The entrepreneurial spirit of the age can make us feel like we have to develop creative and original ideas to grow the Church and keep God's people satisfied. On the other hand, we find reassurance in God's Word and the Church's past wisdom that we serve the saints better by focusing on doing well at preaching Christ from all Scripture, confirming that gospel by giving them the sacraments, and shepherding them through prayer and pastoral care. God gets the credit when we lean upon the means that do not seem worldly-wise but are his instruments of the Spirit's work of shaping his people and giving Christ and his benefits to them.

12. The Resurrection: The Framework for the Faith and the Rise of Liberalism

William Edgar

Introduction

Reflection on the relation of theological liberalism to the Nicene Creed faces two major challenges. The first is defining liberalism. Can any meaningful generalizations be made that are fair to the movement, if it is a movement? Francis Schaeffer, known for his summary judgments, referred to all modern theology as "the new theology."[1] When I was a young seminarian, the conservative school I attended constantly referred to its opponents as "modernists." Today, careful scholarship might balk at these kinds of simple summaries. Karl Barth and his followers strenuously objected to being lumped together as liberals. Their preferred labels were "crisis theology," "neo-orthodoxy," or "dialectical theology." Paul Tillich (1886-1965), considered by many to be liberal, thought of himself more as a mystic than a classical liberal.[2]

Then there is the Nicene Creed (325/381 AD). It is rich, addressing numerous issues, and has had a remarkable history in liturgy. It is not feasible to study the entire Creed in a short space without falling into caricature. Creeds are known in many languages as a *symbol*, not so much because they are a figure but because by such a mark one could verify the authenticity of the Faith. One might think of it as one part of an object broken in two, which tests whether another half fits properly, thus requiring a proper symbol.[3] The Nicene Creed is accordingly a mark of orthodoxy.

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1 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 1, *et passim*. He did not consider evangelical theology, or what he dubbed "the historic Christian position," to be "new theology."

2 Tillich's commitments to mysticism are controversial. He no doubt was not an *absolute* mystic in the Medieval sense. See James R. Horne, "Tillich's Rejection of Absolute Mysticism," *The Journal of Religion* 58, no. 2 (1978): 130–39. It might be appropriate to label this as "baptized mysticism." See Sanghoon Baek, *"'Baptized Mysticism': An Exploration of Paul Tillich's Theology of Mysticism And Its Spiritual Theological Implications"* (Knox College and University of Toronto, 2014).

3 This very image has been used to signify the creeds. A friendship necklace, broken in two, requires the pieces to fit together for the friendship to be vouchsafed. The

But not to everyone. There are those who reject any creed because, in their view, creeds do not connect directly with the Christ of the Bible. Accordingly, some object to creeds that appear to reduce Christian doctrine to philosophy. It is true that the bishops who formulated the early creeds made use of the language of Greek philosophy to articulate various Christian doctrines. But how can we avoid using some kind of language to summarize the Faith? Certain contemporary scholars, such as Bart Ehrman, believe it is impossible to unify the diverse views represented in Scripture into a single statement.[4] Of course, non-Trinitarians such as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses object to the Nicene Creed. Famously, the Eastern Church rejected the addition of the *filioque* clause that included "the Son" with the Father as the source of the Holy Spirit's procession.

But here we want to take a closer look at the posture of liberal theology toward the Nicene Creed. Though another challenge is that liberal theology does not often comment directly on Nicaea, we believe we can erect such a comparison.

In view of all these challenges, I propose we take an overview of how liberal theology originated, what are its main features, its development in North America, and what might be the way it contrasts with certain relevant portions of the Nicene Creed. I want particularly to consider Nicaea's references to historical essentials, in view of the challenges from liberal theology. As we have indicated, to look at either all of liberalism or the entire Creed would require far more length than we can produce here. Even this narrower focus must be wary of hasty generalizations.

Features of American Liberal Theology

For convenience, then, let us concentrate on North American liberal theology.[5] It is sometimes claimed that liberal theology is dead, or at least

term *symbol,* originally from the Latin *symbolum*, was apparently introduced to the West in Late Middle English.

4 Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2013). Ehrman does not deny the existence of Jesus outright but highlights the complexity of sorting out the data.

5 There are numerous accounts of the rise of liberal theology, North American and beyond. Michael J. Langford presents a defense of liberal theology in his *The Tradition of Liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). Peter C. Hodgson treats the subject by warning against "fundamentalists" and other opponents of modernism, in *Liberal Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007). One of the most helpful studies focusing on North America is Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Fathers Refounded: Protestant Liberalism, Roman Catholic Modernism, and the Teachings of Early*

passé. Gary Dorrien raises this possibility, only to refute it, in his substantial volumes on liberal theology. Though he avers it is the most "creative" tradition since the Reformation, it is often considered deceased.[6] But the rumors of its death are exaggerated!

Liberal theology did not, of course, originate in North America. It came to the new world from Europe, particularly from Germany and to some extent Great Britain. Specifically, it owes its origins to the odd combination of rationalism and romanticism, rooted in the European Enlightenment and its aftermath. On the surface, it would appear romanticism was a reaction against rationalism. Yet, both were present in different proportions in the same personages.

A parallel from literature is instructive. In the early nineteenth century, the subject matter, the characters depicted, even the locations where any action takes place, became more and more substantial. Erich Auerbach, the remarkable literary critic of the previous century, remarks that Honoré de Balzac's novel *Le père Goriot* (1834) represented a new kind of modern realism.[7] The author minutely describes the boardinghouse where the owner, Mme Vauquer, and various lodgers act out their characters. More than any previous author, Balzac studied the connection between the rooms (or any setting) in their detail and the psychology of the characters. He even connects the boarding house to the larger mysteries of the city of Paris. This is not a simple case of bleak realism, even less of positivism. Balzac is more than a simple realist. He is a visionary, an empirico-metaphysical visionary (a school popular at the time) who follows a romantic longing for the supernatural. In this, he was following a number of popular biologists, today discredited, but for Balzac a conduit to the supernatural.[8] So, he is the literary progenitor of both realism and romanticism. And here is the correlation with liberal theology: to use Rudolph Otto's image, it combines a trust in science with a longing for the "holy."[9]

Christianity in Early Twentieth Century America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

6 Gary Dorrian, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 1, *Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1:xv.

7 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Representations of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 468–491.

8 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 474ff.

9 Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factors in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, transl. John W. Harvey (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2010).

In philosophy, these two tendencies were eventually related, ironically, for the reason that while many thinkers aggressively spoke of the ability of unaided reason to give access to all knowledge, a frustration soon set in, because what was being left out was the larger picture of human meaning, historical value, and even moral principles.[10] Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) proposed a radical and influential solution to this dilemma. He divided knowledge into two. On one side, we could know the *phenomena.* We have access to the material world with its mechanical patterns through science. As we apply human reason to explore the world, we discover laws and patterns in it which may be described in human language. On the other side, though, Kant recognized a realm not accessible through reason. It is a higher kind of truth, based on human moral consciousness and "practical reason." These he labeled the *noumena.*

The popular rendition of Kant's proposal is that he saved science while making room for religion. For many in his day, science was a growing threat to religion.[11] Moreover, Kant saw faith, unlike knowledge, as engaging with our will, calling it a "free assent." This is important for the practical function of faith, since our commitment to morality does not simply depend on our affirmation of certain postulates, but on the "spiritual." We can only bind ourselves to authentic morality in our free act of faith. Morality, Kant asserts, thus "inevitably leads to religion."[12]

In the long history of subsequent developments, this dialectic proved unstable.[13] But what remains clear is the parasitical dependence of rationalism and romanticism on each other. In any case, theological liberalism reiterated this tension in ways that reveal a great deal about its inner core. To put it simply, Kant made it possible to save rationalist critical principles while making room for religious faith.

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10 The complex relationship between the two in the British setting is articulately set-forth by Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946).

11 This threat was embodied in the skepticism of David Hume (1711-1776). Hume was an Empiricist, meaning, roughly, that such realities as cause-and-effect are measurable by experience. But could we trust our experience?

12 Ak. 6:6 [1793]; Lawrence Pasternack and Courtney Fugate, "Kant's Philosophy of Religion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2021 Edition, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/kant-religion/.

13 Interestingly, Cornelius Van Til, describing unbelief, coins the expression "rationalism and irrationalism at the same time." See Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 163-164.

Schleiermacher

Space prohibits going into great detail in rehearsing this history. Still, to get a sense of the generation of all liberal theology, we will need to look briefly at a particular European before we look at North America. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is primordial. He is sometimes called "the father of liberal theology." He famously tried to defend the Christian faith to its "cultured despisers."[14] He did this by accommodating faith in this novel way to the twin movements of rationalism and romanticism. He asked readers to examine different social groups in the light of anthropological science. He found that what was common to them all was a "sense of dependence." In *On Religion* he states, "Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe."[15]

Understandably, then, Schleiermacher's views held sway over many successors. He is often additionally considered the father of modern hermeneutics. This view might seem incongruous when one considers that the interpretation of biblical texts has characterized theology from the beginning. However, Schleiermacher's originality, more than his specific views, was to place the study of interpretation as a separate subject from the traditional loci of theology.[16] Similarly, in ethics, he helped launch a fresh emphasis on the ego as the incarnate manifestation of universal reason.

It is clear that a long line of "liberal" theologians followed in Schleiermacher's wake. At the least, the list would have to include Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) and Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930).[17] Liberalism hardly went unchallenged. Schleiermacher's fiercest opponents were the adherents of neo-orthodox or "crisis" theology. Without question, the devastation of World War I provoked a reaction against the perceived optimism of liberal theology. In such an atmosphere, led by Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Emil Brunner (1889-

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[14] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Originally published as *Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799).

[15] From *Second Speech:22* (Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 102). In the bargain, theology became a historical study of how the Church developed a way of life based on its faith. This may be an indirect reason Karl Barth titled his large series *Church* Dogmatics.

[16] Although close to Spinoza's separation of the *sensus orationum* from *veritas*. See, J. Samuel Preus, "A Hidden Opponent in Spinoza's 'Tractatus'," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 88/3 (1995): 361-388.

[17] Among the ablest historians of this succession is the existentialist Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who connects Protestant liberalism back to Marcion. See Benjamin Pollock, "On the Road to Marcionism: Franz Rosenzweig's Early Theology," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 102/2 (2012): 224-225.

1966), the neo-orthodox critique of liberalism sought to reinstate God's sovereignty and the centrality of the gospel of the kingdom to theological method. But are the two positions so different? While the contrast appeared sharp, it turns out the two positions are not as far apart as they may seem.[18]

On to North America

The shadow of Schleiermacher lingers over North America. According to Dorrien and others, theological liberalism in North America was in its heyday from 1890 to 1930. Its chief advocates included Horace Bushnell, Theodore Parker, Washington Gladden, Theodore Munger, Charles Briggs, and Border Browne.[19] It is interesting that most of them were pastors. They believed they were bringing spiritual insights to their parishioners. Following their concern, they trusted that this newer theology would connect with modern science and historical criticism.[20]

Some form of liberalism subsisted at least until the 1960s, with the predominance of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Though somewhat diminished, it was still prevalent in the early twenty-first century, at least in certain (mostly "mainline") churches.[21]

In his thoughtful article on the subject, William Dean asks what can salvage liberal theology in the face of rumors of its death.[22] He notes that for a good while liberal theology allied itself with modern tools, not only

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18 For example, Matthias Gockel argues there are strong points of reconciliation between the two positions. See Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Paul Tillich rejected what he considered neo-orthodoxy's claim that the Bible is the unique source of revelation; however, he thought revelation could come through other channels. In this he is not miles away from neo-orthodoxy. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Reason and Revelation, Being and God*, vol 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 34. Cornelius Van Til frankly declares they are two sides of the same coin, because neither can overcome the Kantian dilemma (*The New Hermeneutic* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1974], 22-23). Perhaps Schaeffer was justified after all to refer to all non-evangelical views as "the new theology."

19 Gary Dorrien, "The Crisis and Necessity of Liberal Theology," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 30/1 (2009): 4.

20 Dorrien, "Crisis and Necessity," 4-9. Dorrien divides liberalism into three types, "evangelical", personalist, and naturalistic empiricism, each emanating from different graduate schools.

21 See, *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, eds., David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

22 William A. Dean, "Can Liberal Theology Recover?" in *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 30/1 (2009): 24-47.

biblical criticism and evolutionary biology but also modern and postmodern philosophy, cultural criticism, natural science, and even relativism and historicism. He asserted that it still needs to do more.[23] But these are not sufficient to keep it alive. His main contention is that there needs to be another focus besides such adaptations. Drawing from figures such as Henry Nelson Wieman, Gordon Kaufman, and David Tracy, Dean pleads for "faith" as a necessary complement to critical methods. He wants liberal theology to reconnect with "mystery" and go beyond the "knowable" to the transhistorical and transcendent.[24]

In a provocative final sentence, Dean affirms, "[Liberal theologians] must find a way to live at their own base camp, refusing either to ascend to the mountain tops, where conservative theologies stand unsullied by secular criticism, or to descend below timberline, where the sighting of a liberal theologian is greeted with all the skepticism accorded reports of Big Foot—a humanoid who ... never truly existed in the real world..."[25] What is significant here is the claim to have it both ways: disbelieving historicity and also pure otherworldliness. Dean is a worthy heir of earlier literary shifts, and of the founders of liberal theology.

Such an aspiration is not novel. Liberal theology has always assumed "secular criticism" to be right, yet at the same time wanted something more. When I was in graduate school, I studied with a number of "liberal" theologians. One remarkable example of a resource commended to us students was Claus Westermann (1909-2000). This prolific Bible commentator, on the one hand, assumed much of critical scholarship (hence an errant Bible), source criticism, stood against predictive prophecy, etc., and yet on the other hand he asserted ("preached"?) the biblical warrant, as he saw it, for praising God, spiritual reformation of the Church, and the importance of "primeval" history for the history of redemption.[26]

It is thus a mistake (usually) to assume liberal theologians are merely accommodating modernism, critical of traditional approaches, but

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[23] Dean, "Can Liberal Theology Recover": 27.

[24] Dean, "Can Liberal Theology Recover": 43. He desires a recognition of Kant's *noumenal* realm, Christianized.

[25] Dean, "Can Liberal Theology Recover": 47.

[26] At Westminster Theological Seminary we might call this "protology," though the content is rather different. Westermann exhibited this duality in many of his writings. See, for example, his 1967 *Psalms: Structure, Content and Message*, transl. Ralph D. Gehrke (rep. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1980). See also his massive 1971 *The Genesis Accounts of Creation* (rep. Louisville, KY: Fortress Press, 2000). Westermann grew up in Nazi Germany and was shaped by resistance to its ideology. It is difficult not to sympathize with his motivation.

offering little in its place. Some indeed go no further than deconstruction. But many want to reclaim some kind of spirituality. Paul Tillich, still prominent in the days of my youth, was aggressively opposed to "fundamentalism." Yet he was drawn to German romantic idealism and expressionist art.[27] For him, this was a kind of faith. Admittedly, it was inchoate. Toward the end of his life he said, "I no longer pray; I meditate."[28] His interactions with Buddhism were public knowledge.[29]

Evangelical Responses

Understandably, Evangelical Christians have responded, objecting strenuously to liberal theology. Various thoughtful replies exist. For example, Roger Olson published a formidable book objecting to liberal theology in which he contrasts it with the historic (orthodox) view of biblical inspiration, God, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology.[30] He thus underscores the divergence between liberalism and the theology of the Nicene Creed (as well as the Apostles' Creed).

J. Gresham Machen often addressed the issue of the compatibility between the Christian faith and modern science. In his *Christianity and Liberalism,* he says this:

> What is the relation between Christianity and modern culture; may Christianity be maintained in a scientific age?
>
> It is this problem which modern liberalism attempts to solve. Admitting that scientific objections may arise against the particularities of the Christian religion—against the Christian doctrines of the person of Christ, and of redemption through His death and resurrection—the liberal theologian seeks to rescue certain of the general principles of religion, of which these particularities are thought to be mere temporary symbols, and these general principles he regards as constituting 'the essence of Christianity.'[31]

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27 See Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*. With drawings by Saul Steinberg. *Credo Perspectives* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967).

28 Blake Ostler, "Absurdities of Prayer to the Metaphysic Absolute," *Inscape Journal* 2 (1983). The evangelical, J. I. Packer, comments on Tillich's statement in "The Place of Prayer in My Quest to Know God," *Conversatio Divina*, September 15, 2021, https://conversatio.org/the-place-of-prayer-in-my-quest-to-know-god/.

29 Carl Olson, "Tillich's Dialogue with Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* vol. 7 (1987): 183-195.

30 Roger E. Olson, *Against Liberal Theology: Putting the Brakes on Progressive Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022).

31 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 5.

While he does not quote Nicaea directly here, Machen's emphasis on the compatibility of the Christian faith and science, particularly its historicity, singling out the reality of the death and resurrection of Christ, puts him in line with the Creed, in opposition to liberal theology.

One of the most thoughtful and penetrating evangelical critiques of liberal theology is from John R. W. Stott. Consider his "dialogue" with SCM's former chief editor, David Edwards.[32] The subjects of discussion include the authority of Scripture, the cross, miracles, but also ethics and missions. Unlike some attacks on liberalism, Stott's is charitable, though firm. Among other concerns, Stott distances himself from "fundamentalism," which he considers an over-literal interpretation of Scripture. He compares its adherents to a caged bird. The liberal is like a hot air balloon, unconstrained by the earth beneath. The evangelical, on the other hand, is free, the way a tethered kite is in the wind. Whether these metaphors are entirely successful or not, the point to underscore is that we don't need to be literalists either to answer the critiques of liberalism or to affirm the historicity of the Christian religion.

Many replies against liberalism defend the facticity of the orthodox claims. Scores of books and articles display the authenticity of the biblical accounts of the life of Jesus, his crucifixion, and his bodily resurrection, in contrast to views that try to make pure symbols out of them. I can remember Francis Schaeffer explaining that if someone had rubbed his hand on the cross of Christ, he would have gotten a splinter! Schaeffer was a strong opponent of what he called the "existentialist methodology," that is, the idea that biblical events are symbols or moral suasion, but not necessarily historically genuine. He said if someone had a video camera at the foot of the cross, it would have filmed the events of Passion Week just as they occurred, and these could have been reproduced without tampering. Would Stott consider this approach to be literalist? I don't think so, given his appreciation for Schaeffer's entire outlook.[33] Cornelius Van Til explains that neo-orthodox theology, like liberalism, affirms such events as the death and resurrection of Christ as happening in *heilsgeschichte* but not necessarily *historie*.[34]

Apologists such as J. N. D. Anderson defended the bodily resurrection of Christ as the only possible explanation for the empty tomb.[35] It may not

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[32] David Edwards and John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Reprint, 1989).

[33] Personal conversation with John R. W. Stott, c. 1964.

[34] Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 444-45.

[35] J. N. D. Anderson, *Christianity, the Witness of History: A Lawyer's Approach* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 1969).

have occurred to him (or perhaps it did) that many liberals believed in the physical resurrection and yet at the same time could affirm that what really matters is not historical fact but faith, which is primarily "spiritual" or symbolic.[36] It is important to state a caution here. Many evangelical critics of liberalism are so focused on an empirical verification of biblical events that they neglect the deeper issues of presuppositions. This is not the same as being concerned with the so-called "deeper" issues of symbolic faith. But it is a concern for the larger framework within which faith has meaning.

Gary Habermas is a good example of stopping with historical verification. In his debate with the (then) atheist Anthony Flew, he brilliantly sets forth the evidence for the resurrection.[37] In their discussion, the two agree to compare twelve "facts" surrounding the resurrection of Christ. Flew interprets most of them psychologically, while Habermas argues they literally occurred. Habermas is a dear brother, and his approach has value as far as it goes. And Flew subsequently became a "theist," without necessarily embracing the gospel. But there is something missing here.

It is patently true that the Nicene Creed roots essential Christian truths in historical reality. At its core it states, "He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried." These statements ground theological truths in the particulars of Roman history, carefully chronicled by its record-keepers. Otherwise, there would be little purpose in mentioning the name of the fifth governor of Judaea, who served under the Roman Emperor Tiberius (c. 26-37 AD).[38] There is disagreement about the kind of person he was. Was he a cruel ruler or a well-meaning pragmatist? But there is no disagreement about the verification of the timing of Christ's condemnation. As my colleague and friend Richard Gaffin puts it, in opposition to neo-orthodoxy, there was a transition from wrath to grace *in history*.[39]

As admirable as these kinds of welcome critiques are, they often miss the question-behind-the-question. In his review of Olson's appraisal of liberal theology, Don Johnson argues it all comes down to the question of authority. Connected with that, he suggests one of the main reasons people

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36 Back to our analysis of liberalism above.

37 *Resurrected? An Atheist and Theist Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

38 The creedal statement may have been a reply against the Arians, who denied the Father and the Son were of the same substance.

39 See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 41.

doubt orthodoxy is a spiritual one.[40] He also asks whether the attraction is not the apparent concern for social issues displayed by liberal theologians. These are searching questions, ones that should move us beyond a simple empirical verification of the gospel to broader, contextual questions.

A Covenantal Response

What is still missing in these critiques of liberal theology, then, is the wider context. Only understanding the larger framework will allow us to oppose liberalism, as well as to defend the Nicene Creed in the light of God's self-attesting revelation. In presuppositional apologetics, pioneered by Cornelius Van Til, a proper respect for the larger foundation of historical events is set forth.[41] Thus, a faithful presuppositional defense of the historicity of the resurrection would certainly affirm its factual basis, but only within the larger framework whereby such facts have meaning. For example, the Nicene Creed tells us, "The third day he rose again *according to the Scriptures*." The resurrection did occur in history, but only because it was part of the plan orchestrated by the Scriptures. And behind that, the God who inspired the Scriptures designed it all. In fact, God gives meaning to everything in the created world. Thus, an empty tomb in itself cannot carry the full meaning its defenders hoped it could.

John Frame, a follower of Van Til, has masterfully defended this approach to apologetics, and in the bargain refuted the purely empirical method.[42] For example, he takes on the skeptical view of David Hume. He acknowledges Kant's similar concern. As he states it, "At this point, the Christian must say something about Hume, or general epistemology. We must make sure that the evidence for Jesus must be understood on a biblical epistemology, not a Humean or deconstructionist one." Simply put, the facts of the resurrection, or any other biblical miracle, are not self-evident without the larger context of an entire worldview.

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[40] Don Johnson, "Review of Roger Olson's Against Liberal Theology," in *Proclaim & Defend*, October 19, 2023, https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2023/10/19/review-of-roger-olsons-against-liberal-theology/.

[41] The term "covenantal" is a better one for what used to be called "presuppositionalism." As K. Scott Oliphint explains, covenantal apologetics better takes into account the actual relationship of the sovereign God to the creature. See K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith*, with William Edgar (Crossway, 2022), 41ff.

[42] John Frame, "Ten Problems with Presuppositionalism Answered," *Frame-Poythress.Org*, May 22, 2016, https://frame-poythress.org/ten-problems-with-presuppositionalism/.

Conclusion

As stated above, we have presented only one particular aspect of the contrast between the Nicene Creed to liberal theology, mostly as found in North America. There is much more. Liberalism's definition of God, whether it be Schleiermacher's feeling of dependence or Tillich's "ground of being," stands in direct opposition to the Creed's eloquent declarations of Jesus as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." Parsing some of the rich statements in the Creed must be done by others in this anthology.

Most people are not likely to be familiar with the particulars of liberal theology. Churchgoers in mainline denominations might know it in the air they breathe, without knowing much about Schleiermacher or Bushnell. But they will nevertheless *feel* that the historic Christian faith has been discredited, while yet they somehow believe in "the man upstairs." My mother used to quip that since the Scopes trial, we don't believe as our forefathers did! Liberal theology may not be the only cause of such a drift. But it adds plausibility to much of what is accepted in matters of religion. It is worth revisiting the Nicene Creed, if only to know what our forefathers believed, and to consider its truth-claims about history and many other points of doctrine.

Our main argument boils down to recognizing the worldview backdrop for any critique of liberalism to be valid, as well as the Christian position we want to defend. Only then are we fully entitled to "look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

13. Now More Than Ever: Nicaea and the Church Today

Jeremiah W. Montgomery

Introduction

It is always a joy to lead a congregation in confessing the *Nicene Creed* as a part of Christian worship. In introducing it, I note to the assembly that, although the Creed is not Scripture, it is a faithful summary of essential Christian teaching accepted by almost every branch of the Church. I also like to remind the congregation that the Creed has already been confessed, that very day, by other Christians gathered for worship around the world. Then I call them to confess the Creed in response to this question: "Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, what does every Christian believe?"

In using this prompt, I am not being naïve. I know that there are many serious Christians, and perhaps even whole congregations (at least here in the West), who have never taken the words of Nicaea upon their lips. I also know that there are many faithful denominations (such as my own) in which the *Nicene Creed* has no official, "constitutional" status.

Yet whether an individual believer, congregation, or denomination has any formal connection to the Creed, we are all connected to Nicaea through the truths the Creed contains. The reason for this is simple: The *Nicene Creed* is nothing more than a concise distillation of historic Christian orthodoxy. As church history wore on, confessional documents grew much longer. By the time of the Reformation, confessions of faith included many secondary convictions alongside the essentials of the faith. Such is not the case with the *Nicene Creed*. Every clause is critical. To strike a single line omits something vital. Indeed, to change a word may open the door to soul-destroying error.

To this the history of the Creed itself attests. It emerged in a moment of intense crisis for ancient Christianity, that "mighty struggle with the Arian heresy, which agitated the Church for more than half a century."[1] In this conflict, the hope of orthodoxy hung on a single Greek word, *homoousion*:

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[1] Philip Schaff and David S. Schaff, eds., *Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., vol. 1, *The History of Creeds* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 24.

a contested word chosen to communicate the mysterious biblical truth that Jesus Christ is "of one substance" with God the Father.

Though forged in controversy, the *Nicene Creed* endured due to its universality. Begun by the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), it was enlarged by the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), then recognized in its fuller form at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). No other Creed in church history, not even the *Apostles' Creed*, bears such an ecumenical imprimatur.

The purpose of this concluding chapter, however, is not to dwell on the Creed's history.[2] Rather, our purpose is to consider its abiding significance. What difference does it make to confess the *Nicene Creed* today? What difference could it make for the future?

Nicaea and the Imagination of the Church

The *Nicene Creed* was not the first attempt to summarize the teachings of the apostolic proclamation in creedal form, nor even the first to arrange such a summary according to a Trinitarian pattern. Yet as "the first which obtained universal authority,"[3] it subsequently exercised a predominating influence upon the categories of the Church's theological imagination. This influence remains today, even in those communions that require no formal allegiance to the Creed.

Put another way, the *Nicene Creed* has spread through the Church not just as a creed, but also through many creedal derivatives which have been consciously formulated in light of its teaching. For example, consider the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*'s question regarding the persons of the Trinity:[4]

> Q. 6. *How many persons are there in the Godhead?*
>
> A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

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2 For an accessible discussion of the Arian controversy, see Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, rev. ed., vol. 1, *The Age of the Early Church Fathers* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2016), 219-249.

3 Schaff and Schaff, *Creeds*, 24.

4 The texts of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and *Westminster Larger Catechism* used here are those printed in the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, PA: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018).

Consider also how the *Westminster Larger Catechism* describes the Lord Jesus:

> Q. 36. *Who is the Mediator of the covenant of grace?*
>
> A. The only mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fullness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, forever.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* were both published in 1647, more than 1300 years after the Council of Nicaea. Nowhere do they make any direct reference to the *Nicene Creed*. Yet their way of describing the essential equality of the Trinitarian persons is fundamentally Nicene: "the same in substance, equal in power and glory" and "of one substance and equal with the Father."

Echoes of Nicaea appear not just in statements of faith, but also in vows of membership. The second membership vow of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church requires those professing their faith to answer affirmatively to the following question:

> (2) Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?[5]

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, organized in 1936, makes no official, constitutional acknowledgement of the *Nicene Creed*. Yet every person seeking membership within the denomination must confess their faith in God the Holy Trinity in terms clearly shaped by Nicene categories: "the same in being" is a close translation of the Greek *homoousion*.

The force of Nicaea can be felt even beyond the fences of confessionally Reformed churches. For example, consider the description of Jesus Christ found in the "Statement of Faith" of the Evangelical Free Church of America:

> We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus—Israel's promised Messiah—was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life,

[5] *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, IV.B.2 in *The Book of Church Order* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020), 158.

> was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.[6]

While less precisely Nicene than early examples, the emphatic language of "fully God" finds a clear antecedent in Nicaea's confession that Jesus Christ is "very God of very God."

Whether formally acknowledged or not, the reality is that Nicaea has exercised an enduring influence on the theological imagination of the Church—even among its less-liturgical branches. In a sense, the question of what difference it makes to confess the *Nicene Creed* today is almost nonsensical; its influence is inescapable.

Nicaea and the Mission of the Church

To say that the influence of Nicaea is inescapable is one thing. To say that it should remain so is another. Does the *Nicene Creed* aid or hinder the Church in its mission today?

The answer depends on the use to which the Church puts the Creed. The *Nicene Creed* is not magical. A bare, formalistic recitation of it will neither save souls nor build them up in "our common salvation... the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

On the other hand, as a concise distillation of historic Christian orthodoxy, the *Nicene Creed* can be a great tool. From the earliest days of the Church, indeed long before the Arian controversy or the Council of Nicaea, ancient Christians everywhere recognized the value of brief, written summaries of Christian essentials for the purposes of evangelism and discipleship. These summaries, referred to as "the rule of faith," guided the Christian mission in five ways that remain needful and relevant today:[7]

Instructing new believers

The Bible is a big book, and Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey. But where does one begin? What are the first facts necessary to believe and embrace in order to sincerely belong to Jesus Christ and his Church? The rule of faith, carefully derived from the Scriptures, provided the answer.

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[6] Evangelical Free Church of America, "EFCA Statement of Faith," accessed 06 Sep 2024, https://www.efca.org/sof.

[7] Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 67-90.

Protecting the boundaries

In this life, the Church and its membership can never be wholly free from error. But some errors, if embraced, push a person completely beyond the boundaries of Christianity. For example, the apostle John wrote: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2). By articulating such biblical boundary markers, the rule of faith protected the souls of believers.

Distinguishing primary and secondary doctrines

Though every teaching of Scripture is important, the apostle Paul himself spoke of truths which were "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3-5). He also allowed that there were questions on which Christians could and should be allowed to differ, rather than bicker (Rom. 14:5-6). The rule of faith emphasized the former and omitted the latter.

Keeping the focus on Jesus Christ

Christianity is distinguished from all competitors and counterfeits not by a belief in God generally, but by its belief that God entered history as a true and perfect man, the Lord Jesus Christ, "for us men and for our salvation." It is Jesus who "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15). "Him we proclaim" (Col. 1:28), "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The rule of faith focused on Jesus.

Guiding the interpretation of Scripture

In summarizing the Bible's big story in a form brief enough to be committed to memory, the rule of faith guided believers in the interpretation of every individual passage of Scripture. Any proposed interpretation of any text which contradicts the rule at any point must be rejected as error. As the crowning epitome of these ancient summaries, as a time-tested, globally respected rule of faith, the *Nicene Creed* is uniquely suited to guide and serve the Church's mission in the same ways today. Consider but a few contemporary examples of its abiding usefulness:

Instructing new believers

As biblical literacy recedes in Western societies, and as pluralism brings non-Christian faiths and syncretistic spirituality into the public eye, the need for clarity on the essentials will only increase. What will the Church say to the world about the identity of Jesus Christ? Is he but a special prophet (as in Islam)? Is he but a good moral teacher (as in syncretism)? With splendid brevity, the *Nicene Creed* reflects the Gospels' wonderful testimony:

> And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God,
> begotten of the Father before all worlds;
> God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God;
> begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,
> by whom all things were made.
> Who, for us men and for our salvation,
> came down from heaven
> and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,
> and was made man;
> and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
> he suffered and was buried;
> and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures;
> and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father;
> and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead;
> whose kingdom shall have no end.

Protecting the boundaries

The Church today is not immune from errors connected to the deity of Jesus or the nature of the Trinity. Some of these errors are more obvious, such as the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Latter Day Saints. Other errors are more subtle. For instance, even among evangelical Protestants today there exists a teaching known as "eternal functional subordinationism." By proposing "eternal relations of authority and submission" within the Trinity, this teaching threatens the unity of God's being, wisdom, power, and glory.[8] A return to the teaching of the Creed, a refusal either to deny or to go beyond its carefully tuned statements about who God is, protects the Church today from all these errors.

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[8] For a helpful discussion and correction of "eternal functional subordinationism," see Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 85-87, 115-119.

Distinguishing primary and secondary doctrines

Nicaea insists we "acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins," yet it does not prescribe an age or mode for baptism. Nicaea insists we believe "in one Lord Jesus Christ... whose kingdom shall have no end," yet it does not prescribe how we must understand the relationship between the Church and the state in this age. These questions are important, but they are secondary. Nicaea helps the Church keep first things first.

Keeping the focus on Jesus Christ

There are many voices in the world today, both outside and within the Church, which seek to displace Jesus at the heart of the Church's mission. We are constantly tempted to focus not on why Jesus is beautiful, but on how he can be useful,[9] usually in terms of a cultural, political, or personal agenda.

Though composed amidst one of the most significant cultural and political transformations in history, the *Nicene Creed* finds its preoccupation not with the glories of Christian empire, but with the glory of Jesus Christ. More than half of the Creed is a meditation on his person and work—a reminder to us that there is nothing more precious, no greater goal, than Christ himself: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25). It calls us perpetually back to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3).

Guiding the interpretation of Scripture: Conclusion

The Creed reminds us that Scripture is accessible to every Christian. In presenting to us the big picture, Nicaea provides us with basic questions to ask as we read the Bible: What does it show us about God and his character? What does it reveal to us about humanity and our need? How does it magnify the wonder of the person, the work, and the promises of Jesus? What does it teach about the Holy Spirit, the Church, and life everlasting? Keeping questions such as these before our minds and hearts as we read any passage of Scripture will guide us to gospel-centered interpretation of every biblical text.

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[9] The present author is indebted to Rev. Dr. Timothy Keller for this expression.

Conclusion

Though it is now 1700 years old, the *Nicene Creed* remains a living, powerful aid to the mission of the Church. That it remains underutilized, especially among confessionally Reformed churches, is a tragedy. The Church should return again to drink of this deep well dug by our fathers.

Nicaea and the Future of the Church

We have seen how the *Nicene Creed* has inescapably shaped the theological imagination of the Church. We have reflected on its abiding significance for the mission of the Church. Before concluding, let us consider its potential to shape the future vision of the Church.

As Christianity has expanded through history, the geographic and cultural center of the Church has migrated. That migration continues to this day:

> Christianity was first dominated by Jews and centered in Jerusalem. Later it was dominated by Hellenists and centered in the Mediterranean. Later the faith was received by the barbarians of Northern Europe and Christianity came to be dominated by western Europeans and then North Americans. Today most Christians in the world live in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Christianity soon will be centered in the southern and eastern hemispheres.[10]

As the Church continues this long march, carrying the cross across time and place, to every culture, language, and race, we will increasingly encounter two things: fresh opportunities for greater unity, and sharper challenges to our individual cultural identity. The *Nicene Creed* highlights both when it calls us to confess our faith in "one holy catholic and apostolic church," to "acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins," and to "look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

As Christians, our identity is not defined by our culture of origin. In his first letter, the apostle Peter wrote to the Church: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). The word translated "race" here (Greek: *genos*) is the same word used in the Gospels to describe a woman who was "a Syrophoenician by birth" (Mark 7:26). The word "nation" (Greek: *ethnos*)

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[10] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 40-41.

is elsewhere translated as "Gentiles" (Matt. 6:32, etc.). In applying these two words to the Church, Peter is teaching us that who we are is defined not by where we were born, but rather by the fact that we were "born again to a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:3).

Our fundamental identity is not American, or European, or African, or Asian. Our deepest identity is Christian. Embracing this does not mean we cannot appreciate the distinctive insights, perspectives, or privileges experienced within our culture of origin. But it does require us to recognize that all such distinctives are temporary and provisional. In the end, we confess that it is only Jesus "whose kingdom shall have no end." As part of his body, the "one holy catholic and apostolic church," we confess that we have more in common with Christians living on the far side of the world than we do with our unbelieving neighbors living just across the street. Though we may never meet most of this far-flung Christian family in this life, we confess that our destinies are inextricably united to theirs in Christ.

When my family lived overseas, we were given the opportunity to worship with an underground church. We did not speak the local language well, and so for most of the worship service we did not know what was being prayed, spoken, or sung in the crowded basement where the church met. But when we came to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we encountered in the liturgy of the bread and the wine a "language" which needed no translation. It was one of the most moving experiences of our lives—a small sip of the real unity that we have as Christians with "the holy catholic and apostolic church."

Written when the Church still bore the scars of horrific persecution, the *Nicene Creed* cast a vision of a better future beyond the pale of passing empires, a confession of shared hope—"the life of the world to come"—beyond the horizon of this divided age. The Church needs this Nicene vision now more than ever. We should carry it into the future, for it is our future.

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Assembled in commemoration of the Nicene Council's 1,700th anniversary and the Creed that was begun there (and later finalized), this volume illustrates ways in which the Creed's fundamental affirmations continue to provoke fruitful theological and practical reflection in and for the Church. These diverse essays demonstrate that the Creed's articulation of fundamental Christian truths remains a lively source of our faithful engagement and deployment of what God says to the Church in his Word. Examining biblical and theological facets of creeds as well as each affirmation of the Creed, this volume commends the Creed as a hermeneutical, theological, and pastoral framework for interpreting God's Word, ourselves, the Church, and the world.

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