***I BELIEVE: THE NICENE CREED***

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Texts: Philippians 2:1-11 and Mark 6:14-16

In the year 325 AD, before most of you were born, Emperor Constantine, who only a decade before had united the Holy Roman Empire under his rule and established Christianity as the favored religion of the realm, convened a council of church leaders in Nicaea to resolve some simmering theological disputes that were creating turmoil in the church and in the empire. “*Disorder in the church I consider more fearful than any other war*,” said the emperor. So, at his direction, 318 bishops met with the emperor to try to iron out their doctrinal differences.

The central issue dividing them was the nature of Jesus Christ. It had been 300 years since Jesus’ death and resurrection, 250 years since the writings of Paul circulated among the early churches. During that time, Christians had sought to understand, not only the meaning of Jesus’ teachings and the demands of being his disciples, but also who he was in relation to God and to humanity. Of particular interest was how his death and resurrection had brought salvation to the world. It may be hard for us to imagine such theological disputes so deeply dividing the church and empire that the emperor would have to intervene, but there were accounts of rioting in the streets between various factions and enough conflict that Constantine deemed it a crisis that had to be addressed right away.

On one side was Arius of Alexandria and his supporters who contended that Jesus was not the same as God but was created by God, the *Logos* or Word that was with God and was “like God.” For the Arians, that conclusion was essential to preserve belief in one true God. A poem set to a bawdy tavern tune asserted his position and did a little trash-talking as well:

*Arius of Alexandria, I’m the talk of all the town,*

*Friend of saints, elect of heaven, filled with learning and renown;*

*If you want the Logos-doctrine, I can serve it hot and hot:*

*God begat him and before he was begotten, He was not*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In other words, Arius asserted that like everything else in creation, Jesus, the Word made flesh, was a creation by God, not one and the same as the Creator. On the other side of the issue were Athanasius and his followers who contended that Jesus Christ was not created but was of the same substance as God, there in the beginning before creation, so that Jesus was both fully divine as well as fully human. For Athanasius this was essential to affirm Jesus’ equal place in the triune God and to make it possible for Jesus to save us, since no mere creature could save creation. Both buttressed their arguments with biblical citations and reasoned arguments.

What came out of that council at Nicaea were the foundations of what we know as the Nicene Creed. It was more than 50 years until the creed took its final form, and it was not until 451 AD, over a hundred years after the Council at Nicaea, before the creed was accepted as a definitive statement of the faith by the Council of Chalcedon. Six hundred years later a dispute over one phrase in that creed – whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son – would result in a split in the church between East and West that lingers to this day in the division between Orthodox traditions in the East and the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in the West. How then did they resolve the dispute at Nicaea such that the Nicene Creed is the only creed accepted and used by all three major branches of Christendom: Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant? And what difference does it make to us anyway?

You can find a translation of the Nicene Creed on page 34 in the purple hymnal in the pew; we will forego reading it in its original Greek where the debate centered on whether the word *homoousios* or *homoiousios* properly described the essence of who Jesus was. Feel free to pursue that linguistic distinction in Greek on your own. Keep in mind that the creed was written at a particular time to express the faith of particular people in a particular part of the world and to address a particular issue: the nature of Jesus Christ. It is not the definitive creed for all time and all people in all places. That it has endured across 18 centuries of the church though is a testament to its simplicity and the clarity of its claims.

The creed is trinitarian in form, with a section for God *the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen*; an extended section on Jesus Christ seeking to flesh out who he was as the Word made flesh and the meaning of his death and resurrection; and a section on the Holy Spirit that originally read just “*We believe also in the Holy Spirit*” but was later expanded to describe the Spirit’s relationship within the Trinity and the work of the Spirit reflected in the work and rites of the church. In its style and language there are Greco-Roman philosophical influences and biblical roots.

One of those biblical roots may lie in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, in what is known as the Christ hymn, that passage I read a few moments ago. Paul is encouraging the Philippians to come together and follow the example of Christ – “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind,” he writes. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” And then he inserts the Christ hymn, familiar words that are a sort of creedal statement. What Paul asserts about Jesus in that hymn is akin to what the Nicene Creed asserts in its own words:

*Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on the cross.*

Paul here refers to Jesus’ equality with God as bearing the form of God but then emptying himself to take human form before being exalted after his resurrection. To make that claim is to assert both Jesus’ divinity and his humanity. It is what we say when we assert that he is both Son of God and son of Mary. He is fully human, yet uniquely also fully God. He is, as the creed asserts:

*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,*

*of one Being with the Father*.

Yet he became truly human. He did not just seem human – like a god covered in skin, a god in people clothing. He was truly and fully human, even as he was truly and fully God. ***How*** can that be? It is a mystery that we struggle to comprehend. Yet with God, nothing is impossible!

***Why*** would that be? The creed offers this response: *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven…For our sake he was crucified*. These are not just philosophical or theological musings about the nature of Jesus. This is a statement of faith that all that Jesus was, and all that he suffered and endured and did in his time here on earth, including his death and resurrection, was for us, for our sake, because God so loved the world! God’s motivation in coming to us, in sending Jesus among us, was love – love for us and for this world that God made. For it was through Jesus Christ, God’s love incarnate, uniquely fully human and fully divine, that the world could be saved.

That is what the creed says. It has more to say – about hope in Christ’s return in glory, about the promise of resurrection and the life of the world to come – but centrally, significantly, principally, it testifies to who Jesus is. In Jack Rogers’ words:

*In simplest terms, the Nicene Creed says: Whatever God is, Jesus is that;*

*and whatever humanity is, Jesus is that too, in one whole person.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Is that what you believe? Who do ***you*** say that Jesus is? When Herod heard of all the miraculous things Jesus was doing, he said that Jesus must be the resurrected John the Baptist who Herod knew to be dead and gone because he had personally had him beheaded. Others too claimed that Jesus was the resurrected John; still others said that he was Elijah or a prophet. But who do ***you*** say that he is? How would you describe him – Son of God, Son of Mary, Messiah, Savior, Lord, prophet, teacher, healer, a good man, an exemplar par excellence of faithful living? All of those descriptors have been used at one time or another. More recently Eugene Peterson (no relation) suggests that

*Jesus is our way to God, but at the same time Jesus is God’s way to us….*

*God comes to us in Jesus; we come to God in Jesus.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

William Sloane Coffin describes Jesus in these terms:

*Jesus was both a mirror to humanity and a window to divinity, the modest amount given to mortal eyes to see…When we see Jesus scorning the powerful, empowering the weak, healing the hurt, always returning good for evil, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Is that how you would describe Jesus? Who do you believe Jesus to be? I am not asking who you think he ***might*** be, or who you speculate he ***could*** be. I am asking what he asks and what the Nicene Creed tries to answer: Who do you believe Jesus was and is – to you? Perhaps your answer might echo the words of the 2nd stanza of the favorite Christmas carol we will sing shortly, words which may have escaped your attention amid the glow of Christmas Eve, words which echo the Nicene Creed:

*True God from true God, Light from light eternal,*

*born of a virgin, a mortal he comes;*

*very God, begotten, not created!*

*O come, let us adore him; O come, let us adore him;*

*O come let us adore him, Christ, the Lord!* Amen

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Gude to the Book of Confessions*, Westminster Press:1985, p.43 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2007, p.37 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2005 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)