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## **The Apostles Creed**

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:  
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended into hell.  
The third day He arose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.  
Amen.*

## **The Nicene Creed**

*We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,*

*of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.  
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son  
is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.  
We acknowledge one baptism  
for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.*

## **Creed.**

Let me begin by saying this is an unusual sermon, at least for me. We're not looking directly at the Bible today. But you know, a lot of people expect to find the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed in the Bible. In a sense, it's there, as it is biblically-based. The Creed can be more or less pieced together from the four Gospels and Acts,

along with various letters, including Romans, Philemon, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, Hebrews, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Ephesians, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, and 1<sup>st</sup> John. But this relationship is somewhat forced. The Creed – and most of us know about two versions, the Apostles’ and the Nicene – was written before the Bible as we know it was finalized. We’ve listened to the Nicene Creed twice this morning. I hope that’s okay. So, how did our Creed come about – and why is it important?

The Creed is a summary of the key beliefs that we profess to hold as Christians. To be precise, a Creed tells us what we believe from a practical perspective, as opposed to an abstract perspective. In other words, a Creed is not an expression of theology, of arguments about the nature of God. It is a statement about the specific facts that we agree on and that define our faith for us.

The Apostles’ Creed is probably dated just after 200 AD. Tradition, however, says that it was written ten days after the ascension of Jesus into Heaven – and that it was the Apostles themselves who wrote it. The truth, though, is that it was probably invented early in the third century and used as a statement of faith by new converts. The longer Creed, what we call the Nicene Creed, was created during an extremely famous council that had a lot to do with the establishment of modern Christianity. Emperor Constantine, Emperor of the Roman Empire, called for the Council. A large part of the reason for the Council was to resolve a serious conflict

in the Christian Church, something that was weakening Constantine's grasp of power. The problem is that there was a form of Christianity called Arianism, which was invented by a priest named Arian; he claimed that Jesus was created by God the Father, and that he was not an eternal being, who has always existed, like God. Arian also did not believe in the Trinity. Constantine wanted a single form of Christianity – and this was codified in a central product of the Council of Nicene, that is, the Nicene Creed, which lays out the basic beliefs that we share today.

But there's another reason, besides unifying the Church under a powerful emperor, for creating a Creed. Remember that the early Christian world had very few books and very few people who could read. The Gospel had spread quickly, without books or pamphlets or what we called catechisms, and without Bibles. Remember that the canon, or official Bible, didn't even exist until about the year four hundred. In the early church, there weren't even widely available copies of the individual Gospels themselves. On top of this, there were so-called Gospels that were very different than the four that we know, and that taught very different forms of Christianity. Arianism wasn't the only "other" Christianity. The Word spread orally, and quite frankly, sloppily. This left room for widely differing interpretations of Christianity. So, there was a dire need for some sort of agreement on just what it was that Jesus taught.

Also, remember that the main concern of the Council of Nicene was Arianism, which denied the eternal pre-existence of God the Son, Jesus. So, it's not surprising that the main difference between the Nicene Creed and the much older Apostles' Creed – whose authorship is unknown – is that the Nicene Creed has an expanded section on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus. The Nicene Creed asserts that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he was “begotten of the Father”, and that he was “true God from true God”. It makes it clear just who Jesus was. And by the way, that word “catholic” in the Nicene Creed - catholic with a small c - means universal.

So, the Apostles' Creed was developed to formalize Christian beliefs in a time when there were few other documents that could be used as a standard. And the Nicene Creed was developed to further clarify our beliefs, in particular, with respect to the nature of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and one member of the Holy Trinity. The Nicene Creed also has extra material on the Holy Spirit, in order to clarify the nature of the Trinity. I happen to like this part. It says:

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son*

*is worshiped and glorified,*

*who has spoken through the prophets.*

Here's something that has caused great debate. While the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament does make it clear that Jesus is God, it's not as clear that the Bible teaches us about the Trinity. There are those who claim that the Trinity was wholly invented long after Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected. But although the term isn't in the Bible, the concept, to some degree, is strongly suggested. Consider Jesus' great commission to the Apostles at the tail end of the Gospel of Matthew. In the English Standard Version, it reads: 28 <sup>16</sup> *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.* <sup>17</sup> *And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.* <sup>18</sup> *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* <sup>19</sup> *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,* <sup>20</sup> *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

We used to say the Nicene Creed frequently in grammar school, that's grades 1 to 8. It laid my faith out for me. It was crisp and poetic. I had it memorized. We would rattle it off in unison. But I really did listen to the words. I knew what I was

saying. It gave me a sense of identity as a kid of faith. I'd like us to say it every now and then here, during this service. If you have any opinion on this, please let me know. If you like the Apostles' Creed better, let me know. If we already do enough formal stuff, then that's important for me to know, too.

Some people think that the Trinity concept is unnecessarily complex, that it's too abstract, that Christianity would be better off if we didn't focus on this. Consider this, though: First, God the Father forgives us all. Second, it was through the sacrifice of the Son that we receive God's forgiveness. And, three, it is by the regenerative powers of the Holy Spirit within us that we are made whole again once we are forgiven. The job is not a hand-off, though, between three different beings. It's not three Gods getting together and figuring out how they can work together to rescue us. I mean, God could do it alone, right, whoever God is? God is almighty.

One day in school, the sister teaching us asked one of us to say what the Trinity was. One girl lifted her hand in the air and said, "I know. I know." The sister called on her. I don't remember the girl's name. But the girl said, "The trinity is three Gods in one, not just three Gods together." Boy, that said it. The sister smiled and said, "Perfect." That's the answer. The Trinity is three aspects of a single God that tell us how we are saved. It makes more sense to think about God as being a Trinity, as three Gods in one, than to think of three separate beings who need to

work together to get the job of salvation done. That's more of an ancient Pagan, Greek or Roman concept, gods working together as a group.

But in case all of this is too academic for you, I want you to know that you have John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, on your side. He wrote in the 1700s, and so his writing is difficult to quote and explain. So, I'll take the liberty of summarizing what he thought in my own words. He liked the two Creeds that we've talked about today. Apparently, his favorite one was the Apostles' Creed. What he didn't like was a rigid notion of faith, or at least he didn't like us focusing on it too much. His was a more holistic, personal faith. He believed that we should focus on being a true believer who loves both God and all other humans. He believed that yes, articles of faith, as in the Creeds, are good. But we should never use the Creed as an alternative for modeling our lives after the life of Jesus. You see, that's the thing that's missing in the Creeds – the command for Christians to be humble, forgiving, empathetic, and kind to others. John Wesley felt that if your faith didn't reflect the inspiration of the Holy Spirit living within you, there was something shallow about your faith.

So, this is why I am a Methodist today and not a Catholic. I'm not knocking Catholicism, and it's certainly true that Catholic Charities do tremendous good around the world. But I like John Wesley's down-to-Earth Christianity. It says yes,

believe in what's in the Creed, use it as the core of your doctrine. But we decide what it means to live our individual lives like Christ. Our Creed is very basic; it tells us about our triune God, about forgiveness and everlasting life, and about the importance of belonging to a communion of faith. Indeed, the full message is incredibly powerful. Through the total forgiveness of the Father, the simple message of love and empathy from the Son, and the burning inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we become complete Christians. We are set free to live our faith the way that we think best.

You know, this past weekend, we had a big old rat living in our garage. Our son Julien set a trap for him. The poor thing was probably just looking for food and a cool place to hang out in the heat of the summer. He was living off his instincts, hiding inside a little closet in our garage, chewing on the plastic handles of Julien's tools, and probably contemplating a diet enhanced with the wiring on our cars. Julien and I felt a little bad that we had to kill the pathetic little guy off. But we're not rats. We are thoughtful creatures. God gave us the gift of creative minds. God expects us to use them. God sets us free to think our faith through. We decide what it means to live according to our Creed. We should enjoy that freedom and celebrate our faith. Being a human child of God is truly astonishing. Amen.