

Theology Matters

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The Nicene Creed Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow

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People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint us. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and histories rewritten.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

*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,
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.*

The first great ecumenical council of the church met in A.D. 325 at Nicaea, a small city near the imperial residence at Nicomedia. The gathering of three hundred bishops from across the church was called by the emperor Constantine to deal with a dispute that threatened the unity of the church (and the empire). The origins of the

Table of Contents

The Nicene Creed Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow...p. 1
The Nicene Creed in Historical Context.....p. 9

dispute are complex, but the crisis that necessitated the council centered on the divergent views of Arius, a priest in Alexandria, and his bishop, Alexander.

Why should contemporary Christians care about a seventeen hundred-year-old controversy, and why should we study the dispute's resolution in what we now know as the Nicene Creed? The fourth century council's determination was not universally accepted then, and divergent views linger still, living unrecognized among church members and their ministers. The issues addressed at Nicaea are not merely ancient history, but contemporary issues throughout the church. In the memorable words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."¹ Perhaps careful attention to the Creed articulated at Nicaea in 325 can, in 2026 and beyond, inform, reform, and deepen the church's faith and life by shaping congregational preaching and teaching.

The Nicene Creed is crucial today not only for what it affirms, but for what it denies. "If the Yes does not in some way contain the No," says Karl Barth, "it will not be the Yes of a confession . . . If we have not the confidence to say *damnamus* [what we refuse], then we might as well omit the *credimus* [what we believe]."² Christopher Morse puts the matter less dramatically when he asks rhetorically, "Are there some things that Christian faith refuses to believe? And if so, how do we come to recognize what they are?" Knowing that those questions are too infrequently asked, Morse goes on to say that "It is far more customary to speak of beliefs of the Christian faith than of disbeliefs of the Christian faith."³

Denials that dwell beneath affirmations are sometimes made explicit, as in The Theological Declaration of Barmen's six evangelical truths. The first of these begins with Scripture: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me." (John 14:6). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in another way, that man is a thief and a robber. . . . I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (John 10:1,9). Following Scripture is the affirmation and its denial:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though we could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.⁴

The Confession of Belhar follows the same pattern, following statements of belief with denunciation of false doctrines. The affirmation that "God has entrusted the

church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ" necessitates the rejection of any belief or practice that:

sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ.⁵

The most dramatic (and sadly ignored) instance of the affirmation/denial pattern is found in the Westminster Larger Catechism's treatment of the Ten Commandments. Each begins with an elaboration of the duties required by the commandment before cataloguing the sins forbidden. Westminster's exposition of the eighth commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," concludes its list of duties by urging us to "endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own." Only then does the Catechism deal with the sins prohibited by the commandment not to steal, including in a lengthy list, man-stealing [the slave trade], fraudulent dealing, oppression, vexatious lawsuits, and inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods.⁶

The Nicene Creed confesses faith in the One God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. What denials lie beneath that foundational affirmation? Contemporary attention to the Creed requires us to be aware of cultural beliefs, religious as well as secular, that we must deny because of what we believe. Affirmation and denial are not only matters of academic interest, but also at the heart of pastoral and congregational proclamation. The Nicene Creed begins with the affirmation, "We believe." In every community gathered around Table, font, and pulpit, vital witness to the truth of the gospel requires clarity concerning opinions and practices that twist, pervert, or deny the gospel. An institutionalized church—institutionalized denominations and their congregations—is always in danger of placing the gospel in the service of its own desires, purposes, and plans. Serious, sustained attention to the Creed can bring the core of the gospel to the center of denominational and congregational faith and life.

The Arian Controversy

The dispute between Arius and Alexander focused on the very being of God—specifically the unity of the Son and the Father. The alternatives were stark: Is the Son fully God, commensurate with the Father? Or is the Son subordinate to the Father, a created being? Arius was a good thinker who was determined to advocate belief in the one and only God in the face of the surrounding culture's pervasive polytheism. He became convinced that the oneness of God could only be preserved by excluding all distinctions from the divine nature. Thus, Arius taught that belief in God's oneness necessitated a lesser status

for Christ. While the Son was a “divinity” he was a created being, subordinate to the one and only God.

“We know there is one God,” said Arius and his followers, “the only unbegotten, only eternal, only without beginning, only true.”⁷⁷ This strong affirmation of the one true God led the Arians to assert a lesser, dependent status for the Son: “He is neither eternal nor co-eternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father.”⁷⁸ The response from Arius’ bishop, Alexander, was swift and strong: “What they assert is in utter contrariety to the Scriptures and wholly of their own devising. ... Hence [in their view] the Word is alien to, foreign to, and excluded from the essence of God; and the Father is invisible to the Son.”⁷⁹

The controversy that necessitated Nicaea is not confined to the fourth century. Every pastor has heard parishioners say that while they believe in God and consider Jesus a great teacher and exemplar, they do not believe that he is God, a god, or divine. Perhaps a more subtle rendition is the emphasis on Jesus in much contemporary liturgy, hymnody, preaching, and devotional writing, paired with diminished reference to Christ’s salvific and lordly mission.

Scholarly engagement in repeated quests for the historical Jesus have little room for theological understanding of his crucifixion, and none for resurrection, ascension, and universal lordship. It has also become commonplace to dismiss Nicene faith as merely one opinion that became established as dogma by the winners of a human debate. A religious implication of the idea that “history is written by the victors” is the notion that the church must now overcome oppressive orthodoxy by recovering the suppressed voices of silenced theological minorities. Elaine Pagels, for instance, contends that gnostic gospels were suppressed and forcibly eliminated by an ecclesiastical apparatus that would not tolerate the idea that people could find God by themselves. Similarly, the church’s creeds are dismissed as ecclesiastically enforced suppression of theological pluralism.¹⁰ The Arian controversy is not dead; it is alive and well and lurking in all corners of church life.

The Rule of Faith

The history of the Nicene Creed has often been told as if the primary business of the first centuries of the church was promulgating doctrine, sorting out true faith from heresy by imposing universal requirements of truth for the ages. Creedal history has also been presented as the fusion of imperial and ecclesiastical politics to eliminate diversity by establishing Constantinian uniformity in church and empire. Both descriptions grow from the mistaken notion that the Creed was “composed” in 325, emerging full blown from the deliberation of the church’s bishops.

The Nicene Creed was not an innovation, created *ex nihilo*, for it was deeply rooted in the church’s baptismal life: “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 (Mt 28:10). The substance of the Nicene Creed emerged from summaries of Christian faith taught to new believers by their local bishops and confessed at their baptism. Because the summaries were specific to each bishop’s location, their articulation varied from place to place. Yet they were not substantively divergent, for all were instances of what came to be called the *regula fidei*—the rule of faith—that provided the church with a norm of Christian belief and practice.

In circa 180–192, well over a century before the Council of Nicaea, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul, set forth an already traditional summary of Christian faith:

The Church, indeed, though disseminated throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all that is in them; and in the one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was enfleshed for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets proclaimed the dispensations of God—the coming, the birth from a virgin, the suffering, the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into the heaven of the beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, and his coming from heaven in the glory of the Father to restore all things, and to raise up all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and King, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess him, and that he would exercise just judgment toward all The Church, though disseminated throughout the whole world, carefully preserves this proclamation and this faith which she has received, as if she dwelt in one house. She believes these things as if she had but one soul and the same heart; she preaches, teaches, and hands them down, harmoniously as if she possessed but one mouth.¹¹

A few years later, ca. 195–210, a priest in North Africa, Tertullian, gave a striking rendition of the *regula fidei*:

The Rule of Faith—to state here and now what we maintain—is of course that by which we believe that there is but one God, who is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced everything from nothing through his Word, sent forth before all things; that this Word is called his Son, and in the name of God was seen in divers ways by the patriarchs, was ever heard in the prophets and finally was brought down by the Spirit and Power of God the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, was born of her and lived as Jesus Christ; who thereafter proclaimed a new law and

a new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles, was crucified, on the third day rose again, was caught up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father; that he sent in his place the power of the Holy Spirit to guide believers; that he will come with glory to take the saints up into the fruition of the life eternal and the heavenly promises and to judge the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both good and evil with the restoration of their flesh.¹²

Tertullian emphasized the foundational significance of the rule of faith by concluding, “Provided the essence of the Rule is not disturbed, you may seek and discuss as much as you like. You may give full reign to your itching curiosity where any point seems unsettled and ambiguous or dark and obscure.”

Some matters did remain unsettled, ambiguous, and obscure, and curiosity—both helpful and harmful—has been a hallmark of theological inquiry throughout the life of the church. But while expressions of the rule of faith, the catechetical teaching of bishops, and the baptismal confessions of believers were not fixed, they all summarized the same scriptural story in the familiar three-part structure with clauses about the one God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. The bishops did not gather at Nicaea with blank slates, but as pastors who knew and proclaimed the faith of the church.

The Rule of Faith did leave one matter “unsettled and ambiguous” if not “dark and obscure.” Both Arius and his bishop Alexander agreed with the Rule’s teaching of “the one Christ Jesus, the Son of God” and that “the Creator of the world, who produced everything from nothing through his Word, sent forth before all things; that this Word is called his Son.” The question was whether the Son was God together with the Father, or a created instrumentality of the Father. Both could point to Scripture to buttress their contentions. On the one hand, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30, *passim*), on the other hand, “I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28, *passim*). Citing bits of Scripture was insufficient to answer the primary question that had to be answered by the council: “Is the Son truly God?”

The Council and the Creed

Today, Protestant councils—general assemblies, synods, and conferences—are brief meetings of strangers called to decide hundreds of proposals and set denominational policies and procedures. Delegates leave the assemblies with no continuing responsibility for the decisions they have made, few of which are known by members and ministers, and most of which are soon forgotten.

The Nicene council consisted of bishops, many of whom knew or knew of the others. They met from May to July 325 to consider the status of the Son of God. The issue,

dramatized by the Arius/Alexander dispute was not new. Varieties of viewpoints had been in the air for centuries. It had seemed to be enough to believe and teach Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without the need for more theological precision about their essential relationship. The Arian dispute required a measure of precision, however.

The council’s deliberations led to a statement that was meant to settle the issue at hand yet not legislate doctrine for the whole church. There was no centralized ecclesiastical structure to make and require decisions that applied to all. The creed of Nicaea became known and accepted gradually by virtue of its persuasive strength, and that took decades. Nicaea was only the beginning of a series of ecumenical councils called to deal with the implications of its confession that the Son is truly God.

The Creed dealt with the unity of Father and Son, but its thinking about the Spirit was confined to a terse (not even a sentence), “and the Holy Spirit.” Only with the council of Constantinople in 381 did the church address the question, “Is the Holy Spirit truly God?” Fifty years later another council convened at Ephesus to answer the question, “Is Jesus Christ truly human?” Then, only twenty years later, a council at Chalcedon was called to wrestle with alternative ways of understanding Christ’s true divinity and humanity: are divinity and humanity blended, or separate, or alternating, or something else?” Nicaea was the beginning of a long, winding road that led eventually to theological consensus concerning our understanding of the One God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

The enduring significance of the Nicene Creed does not lie in dissecting fourth century debates or parsing the bishops’ language in attempting to resolve their church crisis. What happened in 325 is not simply an historical object of scholarly examination, but a rule of faith that continues to provide the now-divided church with a dogmatic consensus that binds church communions and denominations, formally or informally. Tertullian wrote that as long as the church held to the rule of faith it was free to seek and discuss and satisfy its curiosity. But the Nicene rule of faith itself does not function apart from its liturgical and pedagogical home. When the Creed is ignored, taken for granted, disregarded, or dismissed, curiosity will lead in strange directions.

We Believe in One God

In a twenty-first century ecclesial culture that turns away from its own history, most Christians encounter the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, if at all, in worship. Even there some experience the Creed as burden rather than gift. Kathleen Norris expresses a common sentiment when she writes, “Of all the elements in a Christian worship service, the Creed, by compressing the wide range of faith and belief into a few words, can feel like a verbal straight jacket.”¹³ For many, the recitation of the

Creed can become merely customary, words spoken indiscriminately so that while the form remains, their substance is reduced to a shadow. Pastors may omit the confession of faith altogether because the Nicene Creed is too long and there are other, more important things to squeeze into an hour.

Luke Timothy Johnson gives voice to the way beyond seeing the Creed as burden, custom, or inconvenience. “The church today desperately needs a clear and communal sense of identity,” he says. “What does it mean to be Christian?”¹⁴ He goes on to say that “the Creed challenges every member of the community and places demands on them. The Creed expresses what and how the church believes more and better than I do. Therefore it calls me to a level of belief and practice that is now beyond me.”¹⁵ The Nicene Creed begins “We believe,” not because every person who speaks it believes every word, but because it articulates the faith of the church which we are called to make our own. Furthermore, it does not say all that it means to be Christian, but it does define the essential core of the Faith, providing boundaries that are not barriers, freeing us to know and participate in the mission of God.

The Nicene Creed opens with what may appear clear and obvious: “We believe in one God.” Those five words are the taken for granted presupposition of everything else in the Christian faith. However, when the Creed begins by confessing faith in one God, it is generally assumed that everyone knows what is meant when the word “God” is uttered. Preaching and teaching as well as confessing proceed in the naïve belief that “God” is intended and heard the same way by speaker/hearer and writer/reader. But a moment’s reflection is enough for us to know that “God” is a word that is filled with many meanings, ranging from the faithful to the instrumental and sentimental to the bizarre.

Popular culture both reflects and shapes understandings of “god” among Christians. Movies and television portray god as a humorous meddler or a helpful intervenor who solves personal problems. In sequential versions of “the power of positive thinking” and “the health and wealth gospel” god is represented as the benign power to fulfill everyone’s wishes. Social historian Charles Lippy traces a generic American religiosity that sees god as a divine power directly available to ordinary people, tapping a reservoir of latent power within the self.¹⁶ God can also be seen as the power to achieve social and political aims. None of this is new or unusual. Calvin characterized human nature as “a perpetual factory of idols,”¹⁷ for the constant human temptation is the effortless creation of a god made in our image.

Everything that follows from the opening words of the Creed fills the word “God” with a rich array of biblical

narratives, poetry, indications, limitations, similes, metaphors, and pictures. The Nicene Creed first gives faithful content to the word “God” by naming God “One, Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all there is, seen and unseen.” These are not definitions of God, but *namings* of God.

Then Moses said to God [Elohim] “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘the God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘what is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM [YHWH].” And he said “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM [YHWH] has sent me to you’ (Ex 3:13–14).

What is in a name? Moses asked *who what, when, where, why, how are you*, God? The answer to Moses’ question and to ours lies in the narrative of God’s presence with Israel and in Christ. The creedal words “Father, Almighty, Maker,” and the stipulations “of heaven, earth, all things, seen and unseen” are filled by the actions of God in the life of a people and in their experience articulated in praise, prayer, and action of their own. The Creed points to what we know of God in the *Tenach*—the Torah, Prophets, and Writings of the First Covenants. The Creed also points to what follows, for *Father* is correlative with *Son*.

What does the opening of the Nicene Creed refuse? False gods, of course—not only images in stone and wood, but images that dwell in the minds of those who exchange the scriptural record of God’s presence for cultural myths of our own imagining. Karl Barth made this clear. “Our knowledge of God,” he wrote, “could so easily be an empty movement of thought if in the movement which we regard as the knowledge of God, we are really alone and not occupied with God at all but only with ourselves, absolutizing our own nature and being, projecting it into the infinite, setting up a reflection of our own glory. Carried through in this way, the movement of thought is empty because it is without object. It is a mere game.”¹⁸

The Nicene Creed is scriptural, not by quoting verses, but by employing namings of God that point us to God’s way in the world and among his people. Again, Barth makes the point well: “The [biblical] passages which speak expressly of the uniqueness of God are only in a sense the spokesmen for a far more extensive conception of the uniqueness of the form and content of the events between God and man in which the being of God as the one and only God has been revealed.”¹⁹

We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ

The Nicene Creed unfolds belief in the Lord Jesus Christ in two interdependent ways. The first of these is in response to the Arian contention and its contemporary successors. It addresses the central issue: Is the Son of

the Father truly God as God is God? Nicaea's elegant words are employed to drive the point that the Son of God is, indeed, one with God the Father.

*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.*

The language used to refer to Jesus Christ flows directly from the language used of God—*believe ... one ... Lord ... only ... Son ... eternally ... all things made*. Our way of referring to three 'articles' of the Creed is a misleading convenience. What is intended as a seamless whole, easily becomes understood as three separate statements. Nicaea is one creed, and therefore language used of the Holy Spirit also echoes language used of the Father and the Son—*Lord ... giver of life*. Each of the 'articles' only proclaims its truth in fullness when it is confessed integrally with the other two. (The PCUSA's "A Brief Statement of Faith," intended for use in worship illustrates the problem. Not brief enough to be confessed in whole during worship, it is suggested that "trust in Jesus Christ, trust in God, and trust in God the Holy Spirit" can be used separately in worship, beginning and concluding each with the Statement's opening and closing lines.)

The Nicene Creed elegantly articulates the unity of Father and Son: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from True God." Lest the little preposition "from (*ek* in Greek) be misconstrued as indicating priority, the Creed stresses the positive *true* God and then makes two crucial distinctions. First, the Son is *not made*, that is, not one of the "all" that God has made, in heaven as well as on earth, unseen as well as visible. But what does it mean to say *begotten not made*? What is the difference? Clearly, the intent of "not made" eliminates the Arian assertion that "there was a time when the Son was not," and therefore a lesser, created being. But what, then, is the contrary assertion that the Son of God was begotten? The technical use of the term is elusive, but the intention is to underscore Father-Son unity in distinction from a maker-created inequality.

The Son bears the essence, the fullness, the *Being* of the Father. The technical articulation of the difference between Arians and the Creed hinges on the little Greek letter *iota*, the equivalent of the English *i*. In Greek the word *homoiousios* is translated "similar being (Arian contention) while its absence is translated "same/one being" (language of the Creed). While *homoousios* is not a biblical concept, the use of philosophical terminology

that the Son is "of one Being with the Father" summarizes the prior "God from God, light from light, true God from true God" sequence. The "begotten, not made" distinction is then sealed with the biblical proclamation that it is through the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God that "all things were made," unmistakably identifying the Son with God the Father Almighty, maker of all things.

The following sequence of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ moves the Creed into more familiar biblical language:

*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.*

The remarkable feature of the familiar recitation of Jesus Christ's birth, life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and return is that it was all *for us and our salvation* and, again, *for us*. The Creed not only rehearses the past and the hoped-in future. It shows all of it as a present reality for us, here and now. Who is the "us"? The bishops gathered at Nicaea were not the "us," as if they were announcing their special access to the grace of Christ. Nor is the "us" confined to Christians, for the "coming down from heaven" was to become "truly human" for the sake of all humankind. Surely Christians know what others do not, that it was all for them as well. The mission of Christians is to proclaim that good news to all who do not know that Christ is, for the sake of their salvation, for them. What Nicaea did not need to specify, and Christians today need to understand more fully and to proclaim more adequately is what is meant by "salvation."

A second notable feature is that the Nicene Creed, like the later Apostles' Creed, makes it clear that Christ was "crucified under Pontius Pilate." If anyone is to be called "Christ killers" it is Rome, not the Jews. That the bishops placed responsibility on the Empire while in the presence of the Emperor may be an indication that Constantine was not in control of the council. A third notable feature is Nicaea's acknowledgment that its credal recitation is "in accordance with the Scriptures." Non-creedal churches sometimes assert, "No creed but the Bible." Yet, in the Arian controversy, and in many controversies since, Scripture itself has been the point of contention,

with various persons and groups appealing to the Bible to support their views. Differing interpretations of Scripture may be harmless, helpful, or clarifying, leading to a deepening of the church's faith and faithfulness. Some, however, may threaten the church's fidelity, necessitating renewed statements and confessions that are "in accordance with the Scriptures."

We Believe in The Holy Spirit

The Nicene Creed of 325 clarified the unity of God the Father and God the Son, but it concluded with the almost offhanded, ". . . and the Holy Spirit." There was no affirmation of the Spirit's divinity or even mention of the Spirit's works. The church had always assumed the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in its life—teaching, inspiring, and sanctifying its members, priests, and bishops. But it was inevitable that the Arian controversy would provoke a parallel debate about the full divinity of the Spirit. Athanasius, the great defender of Nicene orthodoxy, wrote that the Arian heresy "speaks against the Word of God, and as a logical consequence profanes His Holy Spirit."²⁰

In the decades that followed the council at Nicaea, Arians attacked the Spirit's divinity, earning for themselves the epithet *pneumatomachoi*, "fighters against the Spirit." Basil the Great voiced the seriousness of the matter before the church: "All the weapons of war have been prepared against us; every intellectual missile has been aimed at us . . . But we will never surrender the truth . . . The Lord has delivered to us a necessary and saving dogma: the Holy Spirit is to be ranked with the Father."²¹

Orthodox theologians ranked the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, yet they never applied the term *homoousios* to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ. Instead, traditional narrative language was employed to account for the Holy Spirit's movement in the life of the church and lives of the faithful. "I reckon that this glorifying of the Holy Spirit is nothing else but the recounting of His own wonders," wrote Basil. "To describe His wonders gives Him the fullest glorification possible."²²

When the second Ecumenical Council met at Constantinople to supplement the Creed established at Nicaea, it added the paragraph on the Holy Spirit, giving us the complete Nicene Creed that we know today. What might appear to be an affirmation of the oneness of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, followed by a list of doctrinal leftovers, is actually a biblical narration of the work of the Spirit.

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

Continuity with the original Creed of Nicaea is apparent in the use of *Lord* (We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ) and *giver of life* (We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth). As the Father and the Son are worshiped and glorified, so too is the Holy Spirit. Even more is intended, however. If the Creed had concluded with the narrative of Christ's coming for us and our salvation it would have left a void between Christ's ascension and his promised return. But the ongoing reality of God-with-us is the presence with us in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Shortly before his death Jesus assured his disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned." He promised the continuing presence of "another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth . . . You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14:16–18) The Nicene Creed articulates God's continuing presence with humankind as the Holy Spirit abides with, among, and in humankind. The Spirit reveals the truth about God's Way in the world, creating new human community, empowering the people of God, nurturing the church in faithfulness, and leading us in faith, love, and hope.

The Creed's narrative of the Holy Spirit proclaims the continuing action of the life-giving One who spoke and speaks through the Scriptures, who forms the Christian community and shapes its character, who unites us to Christ's death and resurrection, who seals, forgives, and creates new life within us, and who fills us with hope for ourselves and all creation. Calvin, writing centuries after Nicaea, sums it up well: "Thus through the Holy Spirit we come into communion with God, so that we in a way feel his life-giving power toward us. Our justification is his work; from him is power, sanctification, truth, grace, and every good thing that can be conceived."²³

The Nicene Creed's narrative of the Holy Spirit includes faith [belief, trust, fidelity] in the "one holy catholic apostolic church." What that meant to the bishops of the Council of Constantinople as they supplemented Nicaea in 381 made sense in an era of the one church, but its contemporary significance is elusive. Our reality is radically different. When we look at the church we see not unity, but division into thousands of churches; not holiness, but conformity to cultures; not wholeness, but fragmented geography, race, class, and gender; not

mission, but distance from apostolic tradition and confinement to institutional preservation.

Recourse to notions of the invisible church is not sufficient to overcome visible departures from the Nicene marks of the church. When the only church we can experience is divided and divisive, worldly and flawed, partial and restrictive, self-absorbed and unresponsive, then the Creed's testimony becomes for us not affirmation but judgment. One of the enduring gifts of the Nicene Creed is to call the contemporary church to repentance for faithlessness. However, repentance is turning around to see the work of the Holy Spirit among us. It means refusing to limit understanding of the Spirit's work to casual confirmation of ecclesiastical decisions or spiritual blessings for individuals. It means recovering faith in the One who is now the Lord and giver of life, who speaks now through Scripture, who now unites us to Christ in baptismal life, who now can fill us with hope in the triumph of God.

"A diseased organization cannot reform itself," says the mid-twentieth century satirist of business organizations, C. Northcote Parkinson. "The cure," he wrote, "whatever its nature, must come from outside."²⁴ The Nicene Creed calls the church to forswear its self-reliance and believe once again in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Nicene Creed: 2026 and Beyond

Serious, sustained attention to the Nicene Creed is an urgent task in our time and place. If marking seventeen hundred years of the Creed becomes little more than a fleeting blip on the churches' radar screens, we will have lost a significant occasion for renewal of our faith and life. In a diverse, highly segmented American society, patterns of belief are no longer shaped by articulations and associations. Convictions and actions have become matters of individual choice and private decision. There are no paths that people must follow or authorities to which they are accountable—whether families, or advisors, or systems, or institutions. Instead, individuals assume that *they* are the authority deciding which of the multiple possibilities to choose.

What is true of our culture is true in the church. American churches are no longer communities of shared certainty in commonly acknowledged truths. The church has never been a uniform community of unanimous views, of course. Even a casual reading of the New Testament letters is enough to recognize that the church has been characterized by diversity from the beginning. Yet the New Testament letters assume that, within the matrix of rich human diversities, unity in faith and life is the central intention for the Christian community.

In a pluralistic church, study of the Nicene Creed together with regular use in worship is an essential task. Its goal is certainly not to impose dogmatic formulations or compel assent to institutional orthodoxy. Instead, common attention to the Creed can engage Christians in a shared search for the truth about God and ourselves—truth larger than ourselves that can liberate us from idolatry and self-deception, truth that can set us free to live in love for God and neighbors. The Nicene Creed is especially suitable for shared inquiry because it has been the most universal expression of Christian faith for seventeen hundred years. Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches have joined their voices to confess Nicaea's apostolic faith. The primacy of time and space gives the Nicene Creed a claim on our attention.

Shared inquiry, in 2026 and beyond, need not be confined in single congregations or denominations. Neighboring congregations and their pastors can study together, denominations can encourage regional studies, especially among recently divided communions. Amid the accumulated wreckage of historic, theological, and ethical battles lies the received heritage that we are called to confess together: *We believe in one God . . . the Father the Almighty . . . one Lord Jesus Christ the only Son of God . . . the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.*

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¹ The line is from Faulkner's play, "Requiem for a Nun."

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 631.

³ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 3–4.

⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016), 283.

⁵ *Book of Confessions*, 303.

⁶ *Book of Confessions*, 248f.

⁷ "The Confession of the Arians Addressed to Alexander of Alexandria" in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 322.

⁸ "The Confession of the Arians," 323.

⁹ "Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and His Clergy," in *A New Eusebius*, ed. J. Stevenson (London: SPCK, 1965), 343.

¹⁰ See, among others, Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2014).

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 1.10.1., in *St. Irenaeus of Lyons*, Ancient Christian Writers 55, ed. Walter Burghardt (New York: Newman Press, 1992), 48f.

¹² Tertullian, "Prescriptions Against Heretics," 13, in *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S.L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 39.

¹³ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 205.

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 297.

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Creed*, 301.

¹⁶ Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious American Style* (Westport CN: Praeger, 1944).

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 4.1.4., 1016.

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, 71. Translation revised.

¹⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*. 454.

²⁰ Athanasius, "Letter to Maximus" (c. 371), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Peabody MA: 1892/1944), 567.

²¹ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1997), 10.25; 45f.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.54; 86.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.13.14., 139.

²⁴ C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law and Other Studies in Administration* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1957), 110.

The Nicene Creed in Historical Context

By Jerry Andrews

Remembering the Council at Nicaea

When artists paint on panels and on walls the events of ancient history, they alike delight the eye, and keep bright for many a year the memory of the past. Historians substitute books for panels, bright description for pigments, and thus render the memory of past events both stronger and more permanent, for the painter's art is ruined by time. For this reason I too shall attempt to record in writing events in ecclesiastical history hereto omitted, deeming it indeed not right to look on without an effort while oblivion robs noble deeds and useful stories of their due frame. For this cause too I have been frequently urged by friends to undertake this work. But when I compare my own powers with the magnitude of the undertaking, I shrink from attempting it. Trusting, however, in the bounty of the Giver of all good, I enter upon a task beyond my own strength.

With these words Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393–457 AD) begins one of the earliest histories of the early church. He wants to paint a picture that will help prevent the deeds of the past from fading from our memory. Like paintings whose colors dim with time he fears the same for our memories of those who had lived and died in the Faith before us. So, too, do we. So, we rely on Theodoret and others of his generation who preserved for us the witness of the faithful. His *Ecclesiastical History* was among the first and now best preserved. This essay follows his history of the meeting at Nicaea.¹

Ecclesiastical History

Other histories had been written before his, some already lost; some were being written at the same time as his, Theodoret having stood best the test of modern historical standards, Gibbon characterized the three

ecclesiastical writers of the early fifth century as "Socrates, the more curious Sozomen, and the learned Theodoret." Theodoret writes, he says, at the urging of his friends, acknowledging the "magnitude of the undertaking," shrinking "from attempting it," trusting in God, to fill in what had been "hereto omitted."

Theodoret himself relied on another. He concludes his Prologue: "Eusebius of Palestine has written a history of the church from the time of the holy Apostles to the reign of Constantine, the prince beloved of God. I shall begin my history from the period at which his terminates."

Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 265–339, referred to as Eusebius of Palestine here) had been the most famous of historians who had gone before Theodoret. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* began where the Biblical author Luke had left off in the 60s AD. It continued in ten books to the events of his day 325 AD—the death of the last persecuting emperor Licinius and elevation of Constantine as sole emperor, the first Christian emperor. Eusebius and his teacher Pamphilus, a student of Origen's, had self-consciously continued the legacy of the Alexandrian Origen, who had spent his final days in Caesarea. Together they revived the idea of a world class library as at Alexandria, attempted to rehabilitate Origen's somewhat controversial reputation and writings, and to re-establish Caesarea as a center of Christian learning, a school of thought, a manner of exegesis, and an important see in the ever-expanding church of their generation. Eusebius' own reputation depended in large part on his *Ecclesiastical History*. It was celebrated and trusted. So too today. Even with more exacting standards of scholarship now, most of his sources and almost all of his chronology held up well. His biases are evident; he is a passionate partisan; he has his heroes.

Persecution and martyrdom were common between Luke where Eusebius begins and Licinius where he ends. Eusebius himself had been nearly martyred. His teacher Pamphilus was executed by emperor Diocletian in 310 AD. Eusebius fled to Tyre and then to the Egyptian desert. Arrested, he was imprisoned. Due to the temporary edict of toleration in the East, he was able to return to Caesarea, eventually becoming its bishop, where he died a year after Constantine's death. During this time of relative peace, he wrote his *History*.

Theodoret picked up where Eusebius left off—the death of the persecuting Licinius and the beginning of the solo reign of Constantine. The world had changed, he thought, and he wanted to record it. His first chapter begins:

After the overthrow of the wicked and impious tyrants, Maxentius, Maximinus, and Licinius, the surge which those destroyers, like hurricanes, had roused was hushed to sleep; the whirlwinds were checked, and the church henceforth began to enjoy a settled calm. This was established for her by Constantine, a Prince deserving of all praise, whose calling, like that of the divine apostle, was not of men nor by man, but from heaven. He enacted laws prohibiting sacrifices to idols, and commanding churches to be erected. He appointed Christians to be governors of the provinces, ordering honor to be shown to the priests, and threatening with death those who dared to insult them. By some the churches which had been destroyed were rebuilt; others erected new ones still more spacious and magnificent. Hence, for us, all was joy and gladness, while our enemies were overwhelmed with gloom and despair. The temples of the idols were closed; but frequent assemblies were held, and festivals celebrated, in the churches.

In the Prologue quoted above he stated his goal was to write what had been “omitted.” This includes the hundred years since Eusebius’ *History* ended and the gaps he felt were left by intervening historians, some of which have been lost to us. First in his *History* is the Council of Nicaea—the events leading to it, the dynamics within it, the aftermath following it.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus

Born in Syrian Antioch, he was raised in monastic circles and trained in classical and Christian literature. Elected bishop of Cyrrhus (at the border of today's Syria and Turkey) at age thirty, he immediately wrote against heretics of many sorts, Jews and Persians, and authored the last Christian apology against the pagans we have. He wrote many and still helpful commentaries on Scripture, some reflecting his preaching. He wrote about the Christological controversies of his day, often himself being controversial. As an historian/theologian he

rewrote the history of these controversies up to his day, accusing some who had heretofore been considered orthodox, some of limiting the humanity of Christ, others of limiting Christ's divinity. He was motivated at times, it seems, by the rivalry between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria which was at this time vibrant, sometimes vicious; Theodoret was an Antiochene and a fierce advocate. He was deposed from his bishopric once and restored by the Council of Chalcedon, finishing out his days as a bishop preaching and teaching, sending letters, and writing his *Ecclesiastical History*.

Some of his controversy outlived him. The Eastern Orthodox churches do not rank Theodoret a saint but name him among the “Blessed.” That is Greek talk for the American South's expression, “Bless his heart.” Theodoret was haunted by the memory, and in some cases the experience, of saints whose lives had touched his own. In another long work, he wrote of the deeds and words of ascetics, monks, confessors and martyrs—men and women, some long past, some he had known.

They lived and died in the Faith before him. This recommends them to us as strongly as Theodoret. No additional recommendation is needed. They are the great cloud of witnesses—saints and sinners alike; victors all—that cheer us on from the grandstands as we now run the race in our generation. Their races were in some respects different than ours—“the past is a foreign country, people do things differently there”—but they have handed us the baton. Our running does not so much replace as continues theirs. Church historians name them and tell us their story. Theodoret is among the earliest historians to tell the story of the contest leading up to, at, and immediately after the Council of Nicaea. He is both passionately biased and recognized to be reliable in his reporting. He speaks of the heretic Arius most often with adjectives attached—“scurrilous,” and Arius' proposed doctrines as “blasphemous.” Before he reports on the long-detailed debates of the meeting, he wants us to know who was there. They are those who contended for the Faith in life, sometimes in the face of death, and now at a called council in Nicaea.

The Whole Empire and Church

Introducing the scene, Theodoret reports the challenge of attending. Emperor Constantine had “pledged his word that the bishops and their officials should be furnished with asses, mules, and horses for their journey at the public expense.” So far flung was the empire now and, more to the point, so spread out was the church, that the expense needed to travel so far for many would have been prohibitive. It was necessary, so it was thought by Emperor and bishops alike, that the hardship of travel should be endured, and, where needed, mitigated by the imperial treasury as much as was needed. Poor health

would require more effort and expense; bishops generally are not young men. Still the Bishop of Rome could not attend “on the account of his very advanced age” so “he sent two presbyters to the council, with authority to agree to what was done.” The records show Vitus and Vincentius of Rome in attendance and voting.

Constantine announced the meeting for Nicaea, a convenient seaport town for those who would travel by ship, near his Eastern capital Nicomedia, and away from the more fiercely rival bishoprics. The church and world had not witnessed such a gathering. Bishops had met in regional gatherings but rarely and only when the winds of persecution were not blowing hard in that region. The ecclesial letters we have of bishops in earlier generations are between people who had not met and probably would not. Clandestine emissaries carried their correspondence. But now an empire wide public gathering had been called by the Emperor. It was important and unprecedented that the whole empire and church be present. Because of travel rigors, the meeting would need to be in the summer. Some travels would need to begin in the spring. The meeting began on the 20th of May. Some may have left for Nicaea with snow on the ground.

The Apostolic Bishops

Next, Theodoret paints the scene at the opening hall by introducing the bishops. He tells us that they were apostolic. Many, he notes, “were richly endowed with apostolic gifts.” They had led in expanding the reach of the gospel, and overseen the gathering of unprecedented numbers of the new people of God into churches. Like the gifted apostle Paul, they had gone out, witnessing by proclamation in word and deed. They had sent out others from their bishoprics, commissioned to plant in grounds where the gospel had not yet been preached. They had baptized and instructed a growing body of Christ in the faith of the Church. That is the gift, calling, and work of the apostles, according to the church’s earliest chroniclers. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles was the first to write thus; Theodoret would not be the last.

By 325 the empire, as territorially large as it would ever be, was beginning to fear it would not gain more, and may have begun to fear it might lose some. This was new to the Romans whose city—according to them “The Eternal City”—was the first and only great ancient city built without walls. Babylon, Nineveh, Susa, Memphis, Athens, all of them, had walls, not Rome. Rome was built by people imagining they would never need to play defense; Rome was all offense. But now the borders of the empire had borders—walls, lines of forts, soldiers stationed rather than marching, barbarians recruited to fill out weary legions in defending against other barbarians. Holding its own was Rome’s new growth. Frontiers had become limits.

Not so the church. The church, still very much a minority in 325, was not yet twenty-five percent of the imperial population. But just a generation ago, if our best guesses are well enough informed, it had been, perhaps, less than ten percent. The majority of those gathering in newly evangelized places to hear the Word were converts. Little if any social benefit accompanied their conversions. They gathered in worship to be instructed in the new Faith. Little did they know; much did they want.

The apostolic bishops of Nicaea, like the apostles of Luke’s *Acts*, thought themselves sent of Christ. They oversaw the planting of worshipping and witnessing congregations throughout the cities and towns, and more lately in more of the dispersed rural areas. And, most interestingly and more on the offense than Rome itself, they had just begun sending evangelists beyond the limits of the empire. For some peoples, the first Roman they met was not a soldier but a monk evangelist. They argued for the Faith once delivered. They argued for it against external persecutors and with popular and philosophical detractors. They argued for the Faith against internal opposition, working against schism and heresy. They were the primary preachers, thus teachers of the Faith. In them—their office of teaching and their efforts at evangelism—dwelt the unity of the Church and the fullness of its life in Faith. They were the core that advanced the Great Commission—going, and making disciples by baptizing and teaching.

The Works of the Apostles

The bishops were recognizably apostolic also for the deeds that accompanied their preaching the gospel—the same healing ministry and miracles that had accompanied the first apostles Luke had recorded—the deeds, we say, that authenticated the preaching of the gospel in the ears and eyes of its first hearers. He cites one such bishop particularly, James of Antioch. Antioch being a common town name in the eastern empire, this bishop needs to be more specifically identified. “James, bishop of Antioch, a city of Mygdonia, which is called Nisibis by the Syrians and Assyrians.” He “raised the dead and restored them to life and performed many other wonders.” Theodoret says no more than this one sentence about him nor mentions any other bishop by name. The claim to raise the dead (note the plural is in the original) has no need for additions. James, he intimates, was one of many such bishops. He quits this point of apostolicity by saying he gave a full account of these gospel accompanying miracles of James of Antioch in an earlier history—*Philotheus Istorica*.

The bishops gathered at Nicaea were apostolic—in word and deed. Their preaching was vindicated by miracles, resulting in many conversions. The numbers of converts

were unequalled since the first apostles. The new membership now required not only an unprecedented number of baptisms but ever-renewing efforts in teaching the Faith of the Church to so many. These bishops were overseeing the faithful efforts at and now effective progress of the great commission of Christ.

Augustine, less than a century after the Council of Nicaea, would take the marks of the church as formulated by these bishops in the Nicene Creed—one holy catholic apostolic—as evidence and identification of the church in his own divided generation. Its apostolicity—the church in his generation doing what the apostles had done in theirs—namely spreading the gospel and following through on its faith-filled reception with baptisms and teaching, now had become also its catholicity, its universality—the presence of the church empire wide. Apostolicity had led to catholicity.

By Augustine's day, a century later, perhaps half the population identified as Christian. But only perhaps. Yet it was clear to Augustine and others that the apostolic work of the last century had resulted in a catholic, that is universal, church. Holiness and unity, the other two marks, would more likely follow now, they thought, but not without great effort and the grace of God.

Augustine writes mostly just before Theodoret did, probably never having read Theodoret. But like Theodoret, the previously unimagined but now evidenced spread of the church throughout the empire was, in their minds and hearts, the fulfillment of the Scripture's promise that God's name would be known and worshipped everywhere, and that all the peoples would call on Christ, every knee bow, every tongue confess. The prophets had foretold this day. The Savior had promised it. They saw it happen. Their generation had witnessed the fulfillment of one of the great promises of God.

Augustine argued against the schismatic Donatists of his day, who confined to North Africa, nevertheless thought themselves to be the whole church. He seldom missed an occasion to point out that they were merely regional, indeed provincial, not universal, not empire wide. He argued that they could not be the church because not catholic, and not catholic because not apostolic. "The clouds roll with thunder [prophets and preachers], that the House of the Lord shall be built throughout the earth; and these frogs sit in their marsh and croak 'We are the only Christians!'" For Augustine as for Theodoret, and for so many after Nicaea, the great gift of God in 325 was not limited to the written creed but also to the continuing living legacy of the lives of catholic and apostolic bishops—a vibrant, growing, faithful church.

The Marks of the Apostle

Theodoret further paints the opening scene of the Council by having us note the bodies of the bishops. Referencing Galatians 6:17, he tells us "many, like the holy apostle, bore the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ." Theodoret writes with restrained passion and graphic detail when describing the marks of the apostle (note the singular) on their bodies (note the plural). Not only did they do the work of the apostles—proclaiming the gospel, and performing healings and acts of mercy—they had suffered like the apostles.

"Paul, bishop of Neo-Caesarea, a fortress situated on the banks of the Euphrates, had suffered from the frantic rage of Licinius," Theodoret writes. Licinius, the emperor, was named not so much to locate blame, but to locate time and place. This is 325; Licinius died in 325. This is Nicaea; Licinius' exile and home was not far from Nicaea. Shortly before, this Paul had been tortured and maimed by the emperor who was executed nearby earlier this same year. It was all so recent, so fresh. Were the wounds fully healed? How visible were the scars? This Paul the bishop had, in his body, the marks of Paul the Apostle. It was all so ancient and so recent.

The Recent Tortured History of Rome

The bloody history of emperor transition in the last generation, as for the last two centuries, was filled with campaigns of war, and only at the last was there a victor and peace for the while. It was also the history of the last great persecutions of Christians by the empire and its emperors. Licinius was the last persecuting emperor. The bishops did not know that then, but we do, and we marvel at such a history in which bishops, recently wounded by an Emperor, are now called by the next Emperor to help him unify the Empire. The two histories—imperial and ecclesial—were now connected. Never again would the Empire and its Christian Religion be disconnected in their histories.

All this turmoil and violence had been hoped, by a careful design, to be avoided. Diocletian, the most recent sole emperor, a very able and accomplished one at that, had established a scheme for rule and transition of power. There were to be two emperors styled as Augustus, one for the East ruling in Nicomedia, one for West ruling from Milan. (Note: Rome is not mentioned.) Each Augustus had a junior emperor ruling alongside, styled as Caesars. Transitions were to be from junior to senior, seniors appointing juniors, all staying in their original east or west. Transitions were not to be hereditary but elective. Their armies were never to meet.

The Tetrarchy did not work, not once. When Diocletian surprisingly retired in 305, forcing the Western Augustus to do the same, no deference was given to his

scheme. The remaining Caesars, their sons, and other pretenders, went to war to become sole emperors. Diocletian had to come out of retirement in 308 to fix matters, but failed, dying in 313. The final two contenders for the throne were Constantine from the West and Licinius from the East. They made peace. Together they issued the Edict of Milan in 313 which, for the first time, granted liberty to the Christian religion. The two surviving Augustus' Emperors seemingly were united in favoring Christianity.

This itself is a sharp imperial reversal. Diocletian had at the beginning of his reign concluded that one religion would unite best the one empire. He named himself a descendant of the god Jove and the western emperors descendants of Hercules. They were all to be worshipped. And all to be worshipped by all. His persecution of Christians was as sustained, savage, and sanguinary as any by any Emperor before.

Licinius, who, unlike Constantine, made no profession of faith at the time of signing the Edict of toleration, soon was flying other colors. Influenced by the eastern religions, probably learned during the Persian military campaigns of his youth, and relying on the strength of the great majority pagan base of the East, he decreed laws hostile to Christianity. By 314 the truce was over between Constantine and Licinius and overt battle began. The winner would be Emperor of the whole empire. Constantine won, his son helping him by sea and land. Near the end of the battles, the end was foreseen by all. Constantine had been advancing throughout; Licinius retreating from the beginning of the conflict. Licinius was, at the end, in the Fall of 324, left without an army, or a prayer one would think.

He had one prayer as it turned out. His wife's prayers to her brother. At the meeting in Milan when the edict of toleration was announced, Licinius married Constantine's half-sister. (This generation of rivals intermarried at confusing rates—genealogy tables of these emperors and rivals meant to clarify are themselves confusing. And ... the short longevity of marriage among these emperors, junior and senior, left few full siblings.) She pleaded on behalf of her husband; Constantine forswore an execution; Licinius was confined to place (a place not far from Nicaea). Within months, Licinius acted up. In the Spring of 325 he is executed on the run.

This excursion of ours into Roman history was not history for these bishops, it was news. Licinius was probably still living and executed only after some of these bishops had begun their travels to Nicaea, the sphere of Licinius' influence. Yet they came. Some, like Paul of Caesarea, Theodoret says, had the marks in their bodies "from the frantic rage of Licinius."

The Visible Bodily Marks

Theodoret paints here in painstaking detail. This Paul "had been deprived of the use of both hands by the application of a red-hot iron, by which the nerves which give motion to the muscles had been contracted and rendered dead." We are to see in our imagination the crippled hands of the bishop mangled into balls. Were they limp at his side? Were they held tight to the chest? Was not his maiming seen each time an assistant helped him to carry his books and turn pages for him, helped him to sit or stand, helped him to register his vote? Were not the bishops deferential to their tortured brother?

There were others. Theodoret quickly mentions, as if we know this already and only need to be reminded: "Some had had the right eye dug out, others had lost the right arm." Note the repeated plurals. Roman imperial torture included branding criminals for life with identifiable scars that would not only make them objects of continued public scorn but also liable to quick identification for further torture. Putting out the right eye and amputating the right arm were most visible and frequent. He mentions only one other by name, "Among these was Paphnutius of Egypt." His testimony, well known in his day, would stand for all the rest.

These are the Confessors. These are the professors of faith, who, short, sometimes just short, of martyrdom, had borne witness to the faith in their bodies. They bore the marks of the Apostle on their bodies, who in turn had borne the marks of the Lord Jesus on his. The bishops were apostolic. They were apostolic—you can hear it in their preaching, witness it in their divinely authenticating miracles, see it in their bodies.

The World has Changed

I have made much of this small part of Theodore's painting because I want to show the contrast of the times. These bishops, perhaps when young and not yet bishops, had been hounded and harmed by the personal decrees of emperors; some within the last decade; maybe some within the last year. Holding firm to the faith commended them to their contemporaries as bishops in the making. They were revered in their day. Most who had lately been tortured had been sought and punished by the decree of the Emperor who had ruled from and lived near Nicaea. About the time they get the summons to attend, they hear news of the ignominious execution of their persecutor at the order of the new Emperor. Now, many wounded by Licinius, and other emperors, are summoned to a council by this new Emperor.

The execution and the summons are related. Constantine wants a unified empire. No one of his many rivals and their armies were left standing now. He is sole Emperor. Like Diocletian, forty years before him, the last

successful and powerful and unchallenged emperor, he is of the opinion that one religion would aid in the support of one emperor ruling over one unified empire. We can decide to forgive Constantine, or not, for such calculations in promoting Christianity. But we should note: those who, in his day, bore marks in their body were not be of two minds on this. They would accept his invitation as sincere and the meeting as all-important.

They knew the council was not the emperor's first attempt at theological, thus ecclesial and imperial unity. Beginning in the West, Constantine had called regional councils in Rome (311) and Arles (314) to deal with the Donatists. Constantine tried to gain this same unity in the East in the Arian Christological disputes by sending his personal bishop, Ossius of Cordova, to Alexander of Alexandria as an imperial legate of sorts to reason with the disputing parties. Theodoret chronicles:

The emperor, who possessed the most profound wisdom, having heard of these things, endeavored, as a first step, to stop up their fountainhead. He therefore dispatched the messenger renowned for his ready wit to Alexandria with letters, in the endeavor to extinguish the dispute, and expecting to reconcile the disputants. But his hopes having been frustrated, he proceeded to summon the celebrated council of Nicaea.

He needed the help of the bishops. They knew it. They appear to us all too ready to give it. They came. What were the travelling bishops to expect on arrival? The persecuting Emperor Licinius had changed religious loyalties abruptly and with malice. Would this new one also? The previous imperial toleration, and thus the resulting public emergence of the church and its leaders, had been betrayed and at cost to the newly exposed leaders. 'Once fooled ...'

Yet they came. 318 of them. From all over. None as many as from where Licinius had lately held sway and sword. Nicaea itself was the city of many recorded martyrdoms. It is hard to avoid the inference that these contemporaries of Constantine trusted the sincerity of his conversion more than do historians contemporaries to us. They voted with their feet just as bravely as they would later vote in the meeting.

Theodoret, on painting the opening scene of the bishops, has one final stroke of the brush: "In short, the Council looked like an assembled army of martyrs." He says this disabled, disformed, disfigured army walked into a room and would willingly face, face down if necessary, an Emperor. With maimed, mutilated, mangled bodies these wounded warriors were ready, willing, and able to offer their witness when the Emperor entered the room, stood before them and, sat down with them.

Constantine the Christian Layman

Enter Constantine. Constantine had come earlier to Nicaea, probably to make good on preparations. He returned to Nicomedia, Licinius' former palace, to celebrate his victory over Licinius in September just past, and his execution a few months previous. Returning to Nicaea, two days from Nicomedia, he settles in the palace there. When he arrived, Constantine was inundated with parchments of complaints from the bishops who wanted him to set right their grievances for injustices back home. Now, for the first time, they thought an Emperor might care and act on their behalf.

The bishops were gathering and gathered in the nearby Great Hall of the Imperial Residence. The space is large and oblong. Pillars now stand in ruins for us to see. At the center of the Great Hall was a copy of the Gospels—the closest physical representation to the presence of Christ they had. Constantine came without a bodyguard. His bodyguards were heathens, Germanic warriors, they were unwelcome. Later Emperors would use as bodyguards Vikings whose bored and random etchings are still visible on pews in great sanctuaries where Emperors worshipped from their balcony boxes.

At the long end of the Hall was a low seat waiting for the Emperor. He entered walking. The bishops stood and hushed. This was their first glimpse of the first Christian Emperor, the Conqueror, the Augustus. Contemporaries describe Constantine as handsome, muscular, long-haired, with penetrating eyes. He is robed to perfection—an imperial diadem of pearls, a purple robe, scarlet shoes now wore only by popes. Adding to all the finery was the recognition of all he had done already for the Faith and Church. The bishops must have been in awe.

But, so too, no doubt was Constantine. He was in the midst of the largest gathering of leaders of the community he had recently professed himself an adherent. Theodoret begins his account of the spoken proceedings by saying the Emperor "like an affectionate son, addressed to the bishops as to fathers, laboring to bring about unanimity in the apostolic doctrines."

Constantine walked the long central corridor of the Hall to its end and his provided seat—a low seat in the center, with the bishops before him on the left and the right. He asked their permission to sit. Nothing like this had ever happened. He was a layman—yes, the most powerful man in the world of his day and for the last generation—yet they were the leaders. Together they sat down.

His stature and fineries contrast with their bent and broken bodies. This moment of meeting is the great reversal—Emperor and Bishops together, not persecuting and persecuted. History shows it is also the apex and beginning of the decline of the former—Roman

Emperors over the generations will weaken and now are no more. History shows this is but one marker in the public advance of the Church—still advancing today.

We will forgive the bishops if they were still somewhat wary, though justifiably weary. The scars were recent and real. Sudden horrors had happened previously. How many, like Christ, had been warned by their disciples not to travel toward trouble? They hoped. Their faith was strong. They came, open to whatever and whoever would come. They fearlessly would fight for the Faith which thousands upon thousands had lived and died before them. That is the Faith in which millions upon millions since have lived and died.

We will forgive the bishops if they, in alternating contrast, imagined their future in terms more optimistic than history would warrant. There is a difference between pursuit and persecution of a king one year, and a request for help showing all due dignity by a king the next. A century later, Augustine, who admired Constantine, would find himself repeatedly warning his contemporaries with the mantra: “The Emperor may have become a Christian, but the Devil has not.”

The Apostolic Church

The Church is apostolic, so says the Nicene Creed. “Nicene Christianity” is a common short-hand for believing to be true to the Creed the Nicene bishops crafted—believing it to be the Faith as taught by the apostles, thus apostolic. Surely this is so. Nicene Christianity and being apostolic is also rightly a reference to the life of the church—what the apostles and Nicene bishops did—teach and preach the Gospel, sometimes at great cost. The Church is apostolic when it believes what and acts as the apostles did.

Grammatically, ‘continuing in the apostles’ teaching’ uses ‘teaching’ most commonly as gerund (a verb acting as a noun). That is, the ‘teaching’ is the content of the Faith, the truths expressed in Scripture by the apostles and now formulated as doctrine by the bishops. When we believe what the apostles taught, we continue in their teaching, we are, the church is, apostolic. ‘Teaching’ is also, perhaps less commonly acknowledged, a simple verb here. This is a reference to what the apostles did—they taught, by travel and trial, by preaching and proclamation. They obeyed the Great Commission by proclaiming the Gospel.

¹ Theodoret, “The Ecclesiastical History” in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, American Edition, 2nd series, III, trans. Blomfield Jackson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1–159. For further reading, see Bryan M. Litfin, *The Nicene Creed: The Story of the Trinity: Controversy, Crisis, and the Creation of the Nicene Creed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2025).

The church that is apostolic holds true to the truth and, just as importantly, lives evangelically by spreading the Gospel. The church that goes out, making disciples by baptizing and teaching, is apostolic. The church that does not, is not. The Creed contains and thus continues doctrinal formulations first taught by the apostles. We memorize and recite, believe and teach these truths. And, as importantly, these Nicene bishops were apostolic for continuing what the apostles did as recorded by Luke in the church’s first history.

The Nicene bishops, Theodoret insists, were apostolic for both reasons. He begins with arguing for these bishops having lived apostolic lives by being on the apostolic mission; sometimes at great cost he emphasizes. They “bore the marks of the apostle in their bodies.” The following bulk of his account of the meeting at Nicaea, by recounting the details of the debate, will argue for the apostolic nature—the Biblical base—of their Christological formulations.

The bishops who state that the church is apostolic were themselves apostolic, continuing in the apostolic teaching, in both senses of the word. These bishops knew and lived the apostolic Faith. You can hear it in their creed. You can see it in their deeds. Because of this moment, and Theodoret’s report of it, we will henceforth recite and remember that the Church is apostolic.²

The history of the church as experienced by the faithful and reported by its historians will record many trials and tribulations yet to come. Some, indeed, are self-inflicted, as was so in needing to call this council to answer the internally generated distortions of the Faith. But this one moment will stand as a paradigm shifting change in the histories of the people of God and the world, church, and empire. The moment is worth celebrating, even now, seventeen hundred years later.

For further research and writing that would help guide us in knowing how much theology matters and how it matters, I suggest exploring not only the published articulation of the Faith but the faithfulness of the Westminster Divines and the Barmen Confessors, and other makers of creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

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² I thank my friend Darrell Guder for teaching me to read the Nicene marks—one, holy, catholic, apostolic—“backwards.” My section on apostolicity leading to catholicity owes much to him. Darrell also convinced me, after much effort, that ‘to continue in apostolic teaching’ meant not only believing what the apostles taught, but doing what they did—going out, “being missional.”

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