

WORSHIPED & GLORIFIED

A Study of the Nicene Creed

Timothy J. Winterstein

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Written by Timothy J. Winterstein

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READER TIPS

Creeds (like the Nicene Creed) and confessions (like the Book of Concord) were never meant to take the place of the Scriptures. Instead, they bind us to the language and the story of the Scriptures. Each word and phrase of a confession is like a little handle connected to many interlocking pieces of the Scriptures. The words of a creed lose their usefulness when the threads between those words and the story of the Scriptures are severed. The goal of this study is to tie those threads firmly between the handles of the Nicene Creed and the many passages in the Bible to which they connect. That way, when you speak the words of the Nicene Creed with the other Christians in your congregation, you are truly *confessing*.

Confess means, literally, to "say the same thing." The original version of the Creed in Greek emphasized the corporate nature of the confession. It started with "we believe." So we *confess* with the Christians who are around us at a certain time, but there's more. We also confess with all the Christians who have gone before us and whose souls are with Christ, awaiting the resurrection. And there's more still: Over all our saying the same thing with other Christians—now, in the past, and in the future—we are *confessing* what God reveals about Himself in Jesus, as that revelation has come to us in the Scriptures. God speaks first, and then we respond in confession and praise using the words He has given to us.

The first session is a little more description heavy than the others, with the goal of laying out a little of the historical context of the production of the Creed. The middle six sessions are meant to expose the connections between the words of the Creed and the Scriptures, so that when you pull on those handles, the words of the Bible come with them. In the final session, we'll try to sum up the story the Nicene Creed tells.

In the middle of the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem described his teaching as framing out a house of faith, but it was up to the people hearing him to actually build the house. It is a great benefit to us as Christians to have Bibles in our homes, but only if we actually read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the words. The Creed is a helpful outline of the story of the Bible, and knowing the outline is important so that we have a good picture of what the Holy Trinity has done to accomplish our salvation and the restoration of all things. But knowing the outline can never take the place of actually reading, hearing, and speaking the story given to us in the words of the prophets and apostles, as the Holy Spirit spoke through them. The household of God is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:20–21).

May God grant that this study not only give you a good grasp of the frame of the house but also drive you to continually "build the house" of your faith with the words of the Scriptures themselves. These words, of course, are not passive building blocks but are the living and active Word of God, revealed in Christ. The true Builder is the Holy Spirit, who uses those words to build us together "into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:22)! Speaking *together* God's Word; believing and worshiping *together* the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and being built *together* by the Spirit into the temple of God in Jesus Christ—this is the holy work that happens in the church. One of the locations of that work is the Nicene Creed.

Session 1

Why a Creed?

INTRODUCTION

Why do we have creeds at all? In many churches around our country, there is no official creed confessed within the church service. The Lutheran Church has always confessed, with the wider Western Christian Church, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. It may be easy for us to take our creeds for granted, since we are so familiar with them. However, it will help us to think more deeply about them if we know how and why these creeds, especially the Nicene Creed, came to be seen and confessed as the basic summaries of the Christian faith.

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There were many creeds in use in the first few centuries of the church. Churches often had their own local creeds, learned by those who were going to be baptized. Baptism itself often consisted of three questions along these lines: Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in His only Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? You can see that these questions are very similar to those in our Rite of Holy Baptism and Rite

of Confirmation, and they form the basic structure of the creeds we confess in our daily lives and in the Divine Service.

The Apostles' Creed is essentially the final form of those baptismal creeds, while the Nicene Creed is the final form of what was confessed after many years of controversy over the relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, what we call the Nicene Creed is actually the elaboration of Nicaea's shorter creed by the Council of Constantinople. (But "Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed" is harder to say!)

The controversy began in Alexandria, Egypt, around the year 318, when a presbyter (priest) named Arius challenged his bishop, Alexander, for holding that the Son was eternal with the Father. In order to bring the widening conflict to an end and have peace in the empire, Emperor Constantine called a general council in Nicaea in 325. However, the creed of Nicaea caused more disagreement, not less. The success of Nicaea was often in doubt until the Council of Constantinople in 381, called by Emperor Theodosius I. It might be easy for us to take these creeds for granted, but the controversy lasted for almost seventy-five years. This session will look more closely at some of those issues and the Scriptures that caused people to wonder about the relationship between the one God and Jesus, the Son.

UNCOVERING THE CREED

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The fourth-century controversies about the relationship between the Father and the Son were not conducted in ivory towers or decided arbitrarily by academic theologians. When Jesus appears on earth and people worship Him, there is a problem for those who believe there is only one God: How can Jesus be worshiped if He is a man? If this man

is actually God in the flesh, then what about the Father? Do those who worship Jesus believe in two Gods? Those questions are the root of all the controversies, as people searched the Scriptures and came to conclusions about what the appearance of Jesus means for the one God.

No matter which side (and there were several sides) of the controversy people found themselves on in the fourth century, everyone agreed that there was one God. The question people were asking and trying to answer then is a question that we might easily ask today: How can God be one and yet three? While some of the answers given did not match the Scriptures—and even contradicted them—we should not think that any of the people were intending to be heretics. They all thought they were following the Scriptures. They all thought they were following those who had taught them Christianity. They all thought they were being faithful. So the question was really not "Is there one God?" but "How, and in what way, can God be three?" On one side, people like Arius, Eusebius of Caesarea (Maritima), Aetius, and Eunomius of Cyzicus tried in different ways to preserve the unity of God by describing the Son and the Spirit as less than the Father. They thought that if the Son, in particular, was eternal with the Father, then there would have to be two Gods, instead of one. On the other side, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea (Cappadocia), and Gregory of Nyssa also confessed that God is one, but they wanted to emphasize in various ways the eternal, undivided unity of the three persons. The one God does not have parts but exists as Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURE

> Deuteronomy 6:4–5: "Hear, O Israel: *The Lord our God, the Lord is one*. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.