

The process of growth may cause a group to change. Since our official founding in 1789, this nation has changed a great deal. Millions have come to our shores in search of freedom and opportunity. In the early days some came unwillingly as slaves. All have brought various customs with them, food, language, dress, music that have made our culture richer, more dynamic.

The church too had changed by the time the council of Nicaea had been convened in 325 a.d. It had begun as a few Jewish dissenters who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the messiah. By the time of the council the church was mostly gentile or, descendants of gentile converts, from a great variety of gentile religions. They had brought bits and pieces of their pagan ideas and thought processes with them. Many of these were based upon Greek philosophy which believed that the spiritual was inherently superior to the material and that we all contain a spark of the spiritual destined to leave this material world. Because of the difficulty and suffering of this material world they believed that it had been created by evil forces called archons, not by a good God. Various versions of these basic beliefs were mixed together in a variety of mystery religions called "Gnosticism". Some Gnostics saw themselves as Christian some did not. The first words of the Nicene Creed deny the basic assumption of Gnosticism, "we believe in one God the Father the almighty maker of heaven and earth of all that is visible and invisible". But Gnosticism was not the reason why the council was convened.

A North African named Arius a presbyter in a church in Alexandria Egypt was teaching that Jesus was not the Son of God i.e. not God's ontological equal. He was not of the same stuff as God. God created him. There was a time when he had not existed.

I was fortunate to have a dynamic and dramatic professor of church history. He said that Arius had a great following a "gang" monks that marched around chanting "There was when he was not" meaning that there was a time when only God the Father existed not Jesus, the created

Son. Some of the monks would get drunk and try to beat up those who disagreed with them. "There was when he was not." "There was when he was not." There was more to this dispute or attack upon Jesus previously accepted divinity than name calling and trash talk. The fundamental issue was this "was Jesus really the divine logos the incarnate word?" the Greek logos is the basis for our term "logic". It implies thought, plan, purpose, actions that reveal someone's attitudes and values. God did this to some degree through the giving of the law during the exodus. But he did all this and more in all its nuances and applications lived out in the fully human life of his Son Jesus. The old Chinese proverb applies "a picture is worth 1000 words. In John 14: 8 & 9 Phillip said to Jesus "show us the Father". Jesus replied "if you have seen me you have seen the Father," Jesus the Son of God fully human fully divine.

What does it mean to be divine? Most of us think of power when we think of divinity, creating the universe, walking on water, curing an incurable disease. There is also the matter of knowledge all knowing, omniscient. When we think a little more deeply we might think of sinlessness, Jesus was sinless. But there are at least two kinds of sinlessness. St. Paul used the phrase "concerning the law sinless," you don't break any rules. But there is a deeper level of sinlessness. Shakespeare said "to err is human to forgive divine" then there is that great theologian, Ernest Hemmingway, in "for whom the bell tolls", "to understand is to forgive". We may be sneaking up on divinity here.

Perhaps divinity includes the willingness and ability to forgo extracting justified vengeance on a penitent wrong doer for the sake of maintaining a relationship. I am more interested in maintaining a good relationship with someone than in having the short term satisfaction of satisfying my anger at them. Jesus tells us that if we want God's Forgiveness we should forgive. And in his parables he tells us of God's joy in forgiving a penitent sinner.

Perhaps it is his willingness to forgive is the ultimate moral virtue that makes God divine. This is what Jesus showed on the cross when he asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying him, Jesus the Son of God fully human fully divine.

Perhaps we should recall how the Rev. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead explains faith. He said that faith is to be told that something is true. And you have reasons to believe that it is true, but there is also room for skepticism. There is no irrefutable proof either way. After considering both sides you decide to live as if what you have been told is true. That action is faith.

A creed is not a scientific proof of something. It is a statement of faith, of what the religious community believes to be true. I believe that the following is the heart of the Christian faith, the reason we can call it Christian; "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";

In other words we do believe that Jesus is God's revelation of himself, his attitudes and values to man. Does our belief about the Nicene Creed affect our eternal destiny? Remember that faith is a belief that results in action.

In Matthew 25: 31-46 we have a parable about the last judgement. Those who have been kind and compassionate to the needy, the suffering, and persons in trouble are welcomed into eternal joy. Those who were insensitive to the troubled the suffering and those in pain, who made no effort to help are consigned to spend eternity in the company of the devil and his angels. The ultimate issue is not one's theological theory or creed it is the way that we treat our fellow human beings made in God's image, as we are.

The Nicene Creed is a statement of what millions of Christians for hundreds of years have chosen to believe about God the Father, Jesus his co-eternal Son Jesus' human mother Mary,

the Holy Spirit, Jesus' ultimate triumph over all, and our own hope for eternal life.

As part of our liturgy it reminds us of who we are and why we gather together. On both an individual and corporate level, it is a statement of how we perceive **ultimate reality, ultimate reality**. The world we live in is often confusing it is easy to get lost. The Nicene Creed is like a map through a bad neighborhood.

Sermon preached by  
The Rev. David Cavanagh  
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