


2007

Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, L. Charles, "Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed" (2007). *Alumni Book Gallery*. 384.
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Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed

Disciplines

Christianity | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Publisher

Canon Press

Publisher's Note

Taken from *Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Nicene Creed* by L. Charles Jackson, © 2007. Published by Canon Press: Moscow, ID. Excerpt used by permission of the publisher.

ISBN

9781591280439

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“No Creed but Christ”?

If one word could sum up the current theological situation, it would be amnesia. The real problem with amnesia, of course, is that not only does the patient forget his loved ones and friends, but he no longer remembers who he is. Too many within church leadership today seem to have forgotten that the building of a foundational Christian identity is based upon that which the church has received, preserved, and carefully transmitted to each generation of believers.¹

What do you believe? A confident young man, attempting to sound neutral and levelheaded, might remark, “No creed but Christ: that’s my confession of faith.” He continues, “I don’t like all these divisive doctrinal questions. They just create a negative and intolerant religious environment.”

How quickly and easily this comment rolls off the lips of so many people! You would think that rattling off this mantra relieves a person of all the entanglements of doctrinal controversy. After all, doesn’t everyone know that “doctrine divides”? This seems to be the conventional wisdom of the day. People today are desperate to escape the snares of dogma, denominations, and other negative religiously entangling controversies. They believe that the barnacles of doctrinal controversy have scarred the church so badly that we should avoid dogma and doctrine like some kind of a medieval plague.

1. D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9.

This provokes a very important question: would avoiding creeds and confessions really liberate us from our problems or clear away the confusion? When you begin to tackle this question, an irony emerges. When someone is asked the most basic questions about Jesus Christ, they immediately begin to articulate a creedal statement. What do you believe about Jesus? Was He really God? Was He fully God or was He only partly divine? I thought He was the Son of God and not God from all eternity. How does this make any sense? How could He be both God and man? How could He exist in one person with two distinct natures? On one level these questions are quiet simple. Yet, on another level these are the questions that drive us to the very foundations of our faith. What do you believe about Jesus? A creed of course helps to provide answers to these simple questions.

A creed, in fact, is the result of answering these questions. Yes, any attempt to answer these questions results in a creed even if it is only a poorly worded or false one. Creeds, therefore, are unavoidable. This is too central to miss; creeds are unavoidable. The word *creed* comes from the Latin *credo*, meaning "I believe." Any attempt to confess what one believes is a creed. Saying "no creed but Christ" is just as much a creed as a written statement is a creed. You should see the self-contradictory problem with saying "no creed but Christ." Even though it is short and rather ill-conceived it is nonetheless a confession or creed. Hence, rather than liberating themselves from the snares of creeds, those who say this have actually entangled themselves in a poorly conceived one.

The Scriptures say in James 2:19, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! It is never enough to say that you "believe." The real question remains: *what* do you believe about Jesus? Reality has a way of foisting this upon us. When you consider that Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, and a whole host of other religions all acknowledge a belief in Jesus, it should be obvious that affirming a belief in Jesus is simply not enough.

In order to be organized and meaningful, even a local community club develops some kind of guidelines to distinguish who is a member and who is not. At this point, confessions of faith become not only necessary but also vital to the well-being of the church. Creeds protect us from error and guide us in truth. Knowing a creed can help to distinguish a Muslim from a Christian. Most reasonable people would affirm that this is helpful. Furthermore, if you assume Christianity to be true, it is not an exaggeration to say that knowing a creed may make the difference between heaven and hell.

The foregoing examples should make it clear that creeds have always been a necessary and obvious part of being a follower of Christ. As one great historian of the creeds, Philip Schaff, says,

In a certain sense it may be said that the Christian Church has never been without a creed (*Ecclesia sine symbolis nulla*). The baptismal formula and the words of institution of the Lord's Supper are creeds; these and the confession of Peter antedate even the birth of the Christian Church on the day of Pentecost. The Creed is indeed not founded on symbols, but on Christ; not on any words of man, but on the word of God; yet it is founded on Christ as confessed by men.²

As Schaff notes, the concept of confessing God by means of a creed was not the invention of the Christian Church. Indeed, some have even argued that God Himself required the ancient Jews to confess him by means of a creed called the *shema*. The *shema* is a kind of primal creed found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God the Lord is one." God required this creed and Jesus Himself used it to answer various people when He was confronted with basic questions.³

Creeds are not only necessary; they are also helpful. Creeds help us answer very old and very difficult questions. Too many

2. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Vol. I: The History of Creeds (Baker Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 [1931]), 5.

3. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 374.

people today try to answer these questions as if they were the first person to face the issue. The sad truth is that they are like the frustrated little boy who wonders how he can make one of his toys move faster. He begins to wonder if he could stop dragging his toy along the ground and make it move more smoothly. He asks himself, "What would help my toys move faster and what would it look like? What shape would it take? How could things move faster than being dragged on the ground? The agonizing problem seems laughable to those of us who desperately want the little fellow to take a look at the wheels on his father's car. Wouldn't that help? Creeds help us like this. They keep us from trying to reinvent the wheel.

The ancient creeds of the church are God's gift to us; they are not doctrinal entanglements. Ironically, they are not the cause of doctrinal controversy; they are the answer to it. We should be happy to know that the ancient creeds of the church can liberate us from the frustrations of doctrinal controversy. They ease the burden of reinventing the wheel and lift us onto the shoulders of men who have gone before us. This is a great benefit. This gives us a very good advantage. For instance, instead of trying to create a wheel, we can move on to other things. We can, for example, work on fine-tuning the engine or make the interior more comfortable.

Creeds are like lights in a dark world. There is always a lot of theological work to be done, but it is easier to do the work in the light rather than in the dark. We don't need to turn off the lights and grope around in the darkness. Creeds can act like lights in dark times. In the middle of a difficult controversy, creeds can help to clear away the confusion and provide us with guidance. In certain settings, groping in the dark can be quite dangerous. Thus, to ignore the light and guidance of creeds would be folly and arrogance.

I have heard some people say that they don't want to depend on other people for truth. They would prefer to work it out on their own. "All I need," they say, "is Jesus and my Bible." They act as if depending on the work of others diminishes indepen-

dence of thought. This, however, is not the Christian approach to life. Indeed, it is nothing more than arrogance cloaked in false piety.

Looking to the past reveals both wisdom and humility. We should humbly look to the past for help and we should not be embarrassed to do so. It is as obvious as asking your parents a question about something that you know they have already confronted and overcome. Wouldn't a wise son ask his father for help? Men who have lived before us are just as much our parents in the faith as those who live today. This is partly why the men of the ancient church are called the "fathers." The Bible tells us to honor our fathers. It is a sign of due and proper humility to ask people who already know the answers rather than to tackle the problem all on our own.

It is not a sign of humility to rely solely on yourself. To the contrary, it reeks of arrogance. Charles Spurgeon says the following:

You are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound the Scripture without the assistance from the works of divine and learned men who have labored before you in the field of exposition. . . . It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.⁴

Creeds not only provide us with help, guidance, and humility—they are also an excellent witness to a needy world. In the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Christ commands Christians to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all that He commanded them. Creeds help us teach others the faith. Indeed, Christ also tells His followers in Matthew 10:32 to "confess" him before men. Paul says the same thing in Romans 10:9: "If you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved."

4. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, Lecture 1.

This means that creeds can be a useful part of our liturgy. As we confess our God, we also experience the blessing of doing so with others who share this faith with us. Thus too we corporately confess our faith to the watching world. Creeds assist us to worship in a way that is decent and orderly. What a blessing to our children who grow up hearing this truth over and over again—they are more likely to remember and believe it. Philip Schaff reminds us,

There is an express duty, when we are received into the membership of the Christian Church, and on every proper occasion, to profess the faith within us, to make ourselves known as followers of Christ, and to lead others to him by the influence of our testimony.⁵

This express duty is running into conflict with popular notions about growing the church. There seems to be nothing less than an obsession to diminish doctrine so that the church can grow. After all, people may not agree with doctrine, and what really matters is that they just believe in Jesus. I hope you can see how this raises the obvious question, “*What do you believe about Jesus?*”

Are you really being sensitive to those who are “seeking” answers if you avoid “teaching them whatever Jesus has commanded you” as He says in the Great Commission? Is growing the church really the only thing that Jesus requires in the Great Commission? You may be able to grow a large congregation, but are you being faithful to the Great Commission, which requires “teaching” people what they must confess—or in other words, teaching them creeds? Jesus pushed Peter to this very point when He insisted that Peter answer the question, “Yes, but who do you say that I am?” Sooner or later, in this world or in the next, we will be responsible for how we answer this question.

While the whole world seems to be going insane over the notion of tolerance, Christians need to strive to make sense of

5. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 4.

the master's demands. We should not be afraid of taking the time to cultivate substance and excellence in how we confess our Lord. Creeds can even help us do this. Though directed to a somewhat different point, Alexis de Tocqueville's words are appropriate when he says,

All who aspire to literary excellence in democratic nations ought frequently to refresh themselves at the springs of ancient literature; there is no more wholesome medicine for the mind. . . . I think that they have some special merits, admirably calculated to counterbalance our peculiar defects.⁶

Of course if we are either ignorant or arrogant, we won't admit that we have any "peculiar defects." Still, if this sage advice is true of the uninspired literature of antiquity, how much more aptly does it direct us to the creeds of our faith? Those of us who long for Christian excellence in a creedless and chaotic age must drink deeply from the refreshing springs of our ancient confessions. There is no more wholesome medicine to the soul. To ignore them would not only be arrogant, it would be tragic and deadly.

Creeds protect us from danger. If you were walking along a forest path, wouldn't you appreciate it if someone warned you of a dangerous animal further down the trail? If you were about to drive a car with no brakes, wouldn't you appreciate it if someone warned you? Creeds offer us this kind of a warning so we can avoid potential dangers. This is precisely why the Nicene Creed was written. It was forged in the heat of dangerous controversy.

The Council of Nicea was convened because of prevailing questions about the nature of the relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father. These were no small questions. According to T. F. Torrance,

The basic decision taken at Nicaea [sic] made it clear that the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the

6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 62.

Godhead was regarded in the Church as the supreme truth upon which everything else in the Gospel depends. . . . Thus the very essence of the Gospel and the whole of the Christian faith depend on the centrality and primacy of the relation in being and agency between Jesus Christ and God the Father.⁷

When someone says they have “no creed but Christ,” they may think it sounds tolerant and wise, but it is neither. It is not only unwise, but it is the height of arrogance and foolishness. Worse yet, it is not only personally foolish, it is dangerous to the whole Christian community. The question is never *if* you have a confession; the question is always *what* your confession is. This is where the Nicene Creed offers us light in the darkness and guidance in dangerous times.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why do some people avoid creeds?
2. Why are creeds unavoidable?
3. What does the word *credo* mean?
4. Why isn't it enough to believe in one God?
5. Were creeds the invention of the church?
6. What Bible references speak of confessing the faith?
7. List several ways that creeds can help us.
8. How does using creeds express humility?
9. What was the main issue of the Council of Nicea?
10. Find some Bible passages not cited in the chapter that are relevant to these issues.

7. T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 3, 5.

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A Corporate Confession

We believe . . .

In Greek, the first word of the Nicene Creed is the verb *pistuomen*, which means “we believe.” While the Apostle’s Creed begins with the words, “I believe,” the Nicene Creed begins with the first person plural pronoun: “*We* believe.” This strikes some people as a distinctive and an improper use of the first person plural. Why did the fathers begin with the pronoun *we*? After all, isn’t it more personal to speak of what *I* believe as an individual Christian rather than what *we* believe as Christians?

Though some in the Middle Ages proposed that the apostles themselves created the Apostle’s Creed, it was not a creed formulated officially in the courts or councils of the church. This may partially account for the first person singular pronoun of the apostle’s creed. However, there is a wealth of wisdom in the powerful little word *we*.

As the church’s first “official” ecumenical creed, the Nicene Creed was not the expression of an individual, but of the corporate body of Christ; the church. In this sense, both historically and doctrinally the creed reflects something pointedly Christian regarding the corporate character of the faith. There is an important unifying and communal character to the first word of the Nicene Creed.

The creed expresses the Christian belief that the faith we possess is “our” faith, not primarily “my” faith. The faith that we believe as Christians is the faith given to us from our Father

in heaven. Hence, there is a unity and diversity properly acknowledged in the first word of the creed. All those who would follow after Christ must join with others who also believe what Christ requires us to believe. There is one God who is gathering unto Himself a people, the church. This one God is gathering His people together in the truth that He has given to His people collectively or corporately.

As such the creed establishes that Christianity is most definitely not an individualistic religion. It is personal, yes, but not individualistic. Individualism creates splintering, centrifugal forces, which cause nations, churches and families to fly wildly apart. Christianity, on the other hand, has always been a vital force for social unity and cultural coherence. Hence, the creed starts with an antidote to individualism using the potent phrase "We believe."

The Nicene Creed is not something an individual believes in isolation from the church. The authors of the creed did not believe they were expressing the collected thoughts of isolated individuals. No, they truly believed that the creed expressed quite literally the God-breathed faith of the Scriptures as given to the church. This is why they referred to the creed as expressing "the divine and apostolic faith."¹

The truth of this creed is not something new nor is it something optional. It is simply what Christians believe. If one is a Christian, then this is the faith that one must confess. It is also the faith one shares with others as members of this one body.

Individuals are not free to modify, restructure, or change the faith in order to suit their individual tastes. This is the objective faith to which each individual must submit and to which each individual must subscribe as that which joins all those who follow Christ.

This is radically different from the pervasive individualism of our times. Because he or she tends to define the ultimate meaning of life entirely in terms of "individual" choice, the individualist is quite uncomfortable with the corporate or cov-

1. T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 14.

enantal aspect of Christianity. The “we” statement of the creed unifies individuals and strikes an aggressive pose against individualism, which by definition isolates rather than unifies.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted the isolating tendencies of individualism in his insightful work *Democracy in America*:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his tastes, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. . . . They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. . . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is a danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.²

De Tocqueville points us to the isolation that God declared “not good” in the Garden of Eden. If expressing oneself, as a human being is an individual issue, then God’s design for men must have been mistaken. God deliberately created Adam first so He could establish several things, not the least of which was the fact of Adam’s solitary existence prior to Eve’s creation. God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” Isolation and individualism countermands God’s creation design. Consequently, individualism creates the opposite of what it pretends to offer. Rather than providing the personal fulfillment of which it falsely boasts, it actually yields chaos, insecurity and frustration. It is precisely this kind of chaos and frustration for which Christianity provides the cure.

We cannot fall prey to the false division between what is individual and what is personal. We are social creatures. We can, therefore, believe something personally while sharing this personal belief with others. Individualism violates a veritable maxim of the faith, as one preacher, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, notes:

2. De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

That man, endowed with a social nature, cannot attain the perfection which is possible to him, in the privacy and insulation of his own being. . . . [I]t is not true that religion contemplates man as an insulated being. On the contrary, it penetrates every faculty of his complex nature, and pervades every relation in which he stands. As the moon's motion round the earth does not impede the common and wider motion of both around the sun, so neither does the connection between God and the conscience become less intimate, when the worshipper lifts his voice in the great congregation, than when he breathes his prayer in the whispers of the closet.³

Many people assume as a matter of fact that individualism is the only acceptable approach to personal fulfillment. With the advent of this way of thinking the ideas and practices that were once standard elements of social cohesion have flown apart. This is contrary to the created order and hence to God's design. Consequently, individualism cannot provide the happiness it pretends to furnish.

Individualism breeds isolation and selfishness, while Christianity demands the opposite. The "we" of Christianity requires unity and it demands a concern for others. The Christian must live for the glory of God and the welfare of his neighbor. Sin disrupted this original design, but Christ has come to repair the ruins of our fallen parents.

Thus the "we" of the creed's opening statement not only demands unity, but also implies obligation and responsibility to one's neighbor. Individualism ranks as perhaps the most petulant problem of modern and postmodern times. Individualism creates impulses of selfish disregard for other people. This isn't merely the raving of "religious" leaders. This is something that most thoughtful observers are noting. Political leaders, educa-

3. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "The Warrant and Nature of Public Worship," a sermon preached on 9 October 1853 in Columbia, South Carolina. Reproduced online at <www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/publwors.htm>.

tors, and sociologists of all stripes recognize the harmful, isolating forces of individualism. One study notes,

If the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others' demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one's freedom.⁴

It is precisely this kind of obligation that Christianity demands. Christ came not to be served, but to serve. This He demands of His followers as well:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who . . . made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Phil. 2:3-8)

Jesus came to save sinners; He came to be a servant to the needy. Of the multiple teachings of Christianity one basic principle is the call to live an "others-oriented" existence. Jesus is our great example, and hence, the creed says, He "for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and became man." Jesus became a human being so that He could save His people; He loved needy sinners and it follows necessarily that those who love him must also serve others as well.

While some people and some cultures nourish individualism as a virtue, Christianity assaults it as a curse. The Nicene formula helps us to appreciate that Christianity in its most basic form attacks individualism like antibodies attack germs in the body. The incarnation destroys individualism, which is why

4. Robert N. Bellah, et. al, eds., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row), 23.

our first ecumenical creed at Nicea begins with the profoundly important pronoun *we*. Christianity is corporate and demands living in selfless community after the pattern of and under the person of Jesus Christ. This and much more is unleashed in the simple but staggeringly potent opening phrase of the Nicene Creed: "We believe."

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the Nicene Creed's introduction differ from that of the Apostle's Creed?
2. What could account for this difference?
3. What is individualism?
4. Explain why Christianity is not individualistic.
5. Are individuals free to modify or change Christian beliefs?
6. How does individualism tend to isolate rather than unite?
7. Is there a necessary contrast between something personal and something corporate?
8. Can something be corporate and personal at the same time?
9. How is individualism contrary to divine design?
10. According to the author, what does the "we" of Christianity imply?
11. How does Jesus' example help us?
12. Find some Bible passages not cited in the chapter that are relevant to these issues.