

“NICENE CREED: ANCIENT WORDS EVER TRUE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church
February 18, 2018, 6:00 PM

Scripture Texts: Multiple texts

Introduction.

This morning we started a sermon series on II Peter. I mentioned Peter made one of the clearest confessions of who Jesus is.

Matthew 16:16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the *Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

II Peter 1:1 Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of *our God and Savior Jesus Christ.*

As clear as these statements are in Scripture, they have been attacked and denied even by those inside the church. When that happens it is necessary for the church to guard the good deposit and contend for the truth and correct and discipline those who are in error.

Doctrine is progressive and it is worked out in time, through history. As we read through the OT there are doctrines that get more clear. When we get to the NT there is much more light, especially about who the coming Messiah is and what He is like.

The early church affirmed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, He was the Savior of mankind, and fully God and fully human, to be worshiped as God.

The early church recognized there was mystery in how this could be, but they accepted it. Jewish Christians were used to living with mystery and more accepting of spiritual and supernatural things.

John 1 was clear enough and they didn't need more.

John 1:1-2, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

But as the church spread among the Greeks, who were known for their philosophies and debates and questioning and who put spiritual things above material things, they started stirring things up. How could God who is pure spirit become material like man?

Starting in about the fourth century there followed about three centuries of intense debate over the person and nature of Jesus, called the Trinitarian Controversy.

Is Jesus God? Is there one God or three Gods? Is Jesus eternal or created?

Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed is born out of great conflict, in opposition to very serious heresy concerning Jesus, heresy that is with us to this day.

Creeds are like the moon, they don't have any light of their own, but they tell us there is light, if they are good, they reflect the light and heat of Scripture. They show us what is in Scripture. They have no authority of their own, only a derived authority as long as they faithfully represent what Scripture teaches. All man made creeds and confessions must submit to the Bible.

Creeds remind us of the importance of history and learning from history. There is a cultural pride that says our generation, our time in history is the best and most important. We are the most advance, we are the smartest, we have figured things out.

That is called ethnocentrism or cultural centrism, or temporocentrism. The belief that one's own time is more important than the past or future. It is a cultural bias, that we live in the best of times.

I call this the *Huck Finn syndrome*. When his Aunt Polly was trying to learn him about the Bible, Huck admitted he was starting to get interested in Moses and the Bulrushers until Aunt Polly let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time. Well that was the end of that. Huck said, "*I don't take no stock in dead people.*"

We are a culture like that, we don't take no stock in dead people or in old ideas or in ancient history. Creeds remind us that we are not the first generation of Christians to have the Holy Spirit.

In the early fourth century there was a man, *Arius*, who had a huge influence on the doctrine of the church and the nature of Jesus Christ. He had gained quite a following. He insisted that the Son was a creature, created by God, that He had a beginning. In other words, there was a time when God was not a Father and there was a time when the Son was not.

The controversy grew so large and heated that Emperor Constantine feared it threatened the unity of his empire. So he called for the first great ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea, in Nicaea, just across the Bosphorus Strait from Constantinople (modern Istanbul).

Over 300 church leaders met together for two months to deal with the teachings of Arius. Arius and Athanasius were both there.

The church had to go back to Scripture and clarify what Scripture really said because Arius was using verses to make his argument.

As you can read in the Nicene Creed, the position the church finally took is very clear. They very intentionally drive the truth home from every angle. They tried to leave no stone unturned.

begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence [reality, homoousion] as the Father.

That last phrase was the decisive blow, and the most controversial. It affirmed the conviction that when we are confronted with the person of Jesus Christ we are being confronted with no one less than God Himself.

If Jesus was only like God then someone else could come along who is more like God. Furthermore, if Jesus is only like God, then Christianity is no longer unique and is just another religion or cult.

But if Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, the Word of God made flesh and incarnate, then He is the final Word, He is God's final answer, there is no one else and nothing further to be said.

The debate wasn't over, it continued mostly over the meaning of homoousios, and the creed that we recite as the Nicene Creed was finalized and affirmed sixty years later at the second great ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople in 381.

This council added the end paragraph on the Holy Spirit. This is the *first creed to affirm the full deity of the Holy Spirit*, leaving no doubt that the third person of the Trinity is also God and worthy to be worshipped and glorified.

The Nicene Creed is an amazing document, and historically one of the most important for the church, apart from Scripture. It is the most universally accepted creed.

We Believe.

We believe, not I believe like the Apostles' Creed. This is not the expression of one individual, but of the corporate church guided by the Holy Spirit based on the Word of God.

Christianity is personal, but not individualistic. God called us to be part of a covenantal community, a priesthood of believers, a household of faith. We are members of the body of Christ and have responsibilities and obligations toward one another, to love one another.

We're a part of a people that has been around for thousands and thousands of years. We are a global people that is multicultural, multiethnic, multigenerational. We are part of something much larger than just us, something that has been around a lot longer than us and will be long after us. We are part of history, meaning His Story, God's movement through time.

Creeds remind us that we are not alone, we are not making this up as we go, we are not the first ones to think about these issues. We stand on the shoulders of our fathers in the faith.

We Believe.

We believe in Jesus. The Bible is the story of God's redemptive purposes in history all pointing to Jesus, who is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14), the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:3), the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), in whom all the fullness of deity is pleased to dwell (Colossians 2:9), who upholds the universe by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3).

Romans 10:9-11 If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

11 For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Implications and application.

R.C. Sproul’s Ligonier Study Center conducted a survey of 3,000 Americans which reveals huge confusion over the most important of doctrines of our faith and even the evangelical protestants answering the survey did poorly. Significant numbers affirmed such heresies as denying that the Holy Spirit is a person, and denying the deity of Christ.

Over half of the same people surveyed think the Father is more divine than the Son, and over half think the Holy Spirit is less divine than the Father and the Son.

In his short epistle Jude attests to his work of contending for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” We too need to contend for this once for all faith twenty centuries later. This survey reveals the necessity and the urgency for it.

Scripture must be rightly divided and understood and discerned. Some parts are harder than others. The purpose of creeds is to make clear, to explain, to summarize, to bring together into one place.

Creeds are gifts to us, tools for training in righteousness and truth, tools for passing on what we believe to the next generation, standards for discipline and accountability especially among our pastors and leaders. They remind us of what is of utmost importance.

Creeds remind us that truth matters and there is truth that is worth fighting over. Conflict isn’t bad if it clarifies and refines. Divisiveness isn’t created by taking a stand on sound doctrine. Divisiveness is created by those who oppose sound doctrine.

Creeds remind us that it is not good to be vague about what we believe, it is important to know what we believe and what we stand for. There are times when agreeing to disagree not just wrong but sin.

Some people like to say “No creed but the Bible.” First of all, just that statement is a creedal statement, it is taking a position and saying what they believe. But second of all, in the great Trinitarian debate, both Arius and Athanasius affirmed the authority of Scripture and both sides quoted Scripture.

People who are departing from the truth often quote the Bible on their way. Satan quoted Scripture. The Mormons and JW's quote lots of Scripture but they have departed from the truth. A no creed but the Bible person could easily be a heretic. In fact, I have met a few. There are Bible only people who reject the Trinity and the full deity and humanity of Christ.

Once a month I meet with some pastors in Bellingham over lunch to discuss some controversial issues. Last month we invited a pastor from outside our group to give an opposing view to what we all believed. He said he affirmed the authority of Scripture and he quoted and addressed many Scripture passages.

No creed but the Bible fails to recognize that there are great divisions over doctrine in the Bible and we have to wrestle with Scripture to find what is true and orthodox.

When we are able to summarize the teaching of Scripture it creates confessional unity. Clear doctrinal truth is necessary for healthy spiritual life, both individually and corporately.

Yes, there can be pride and yes there can be abuse, but that doesn't negate the necessity of striving toward truth and unity.

Affirmations or summaries of faith as found in creeds and confessions are very important. They help us defend the truth, guard the good deposit, and teach the whole counsel of God's Word.

Loving Jesus means loving the truth about Jesus and defending the truth about Jesus. The Nicene Creed says that Jesus is really important. There were saints of old who gave all the energy of their lives, and some gave their very lives, some were persecuted and imprisoned, some were exiled from home and family and livelihood, to stand up for and defend the truth concerning Christ.

There are truths worth fighting for, even dying for. There are times when agreeing to disagree is not just wrong, but sin.

The task of the Church is to discern the truth, rightly handle and divide the Word of truth, to be the pillar and foundation of the truth, so that the sheep are protected, the wolves are warned, the darkness is exposed by the light and God is glorified. And we can thank God for the saints of old who did this faithfully for us, since we are among those they were protecting.

May we be as faithful and may the generations that follow be just as protected.