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## **Our Creeds and a Rat.**

A while back I stepped into our garage from our house. It was nighttime. I saw something skitter across the floor just in front of my feet. I jumped back. I turned the light on, just in time to see that it was a very big rat. I knew I had a pest to deal with. I'll get back to this.

We're not looking directly at the Bible today, at least not for our main focus. We are looking at two versions of the Creed that describe what most Christians today believe. Many people expect to find the Apostles Creed and/or the Nicene Creed in the Bible. In a sense, they are both there, as they are biblically based. The Creeds can be pieced together from the four Gospels and Acts, along with various letters, including Romans, Philemon, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, Hebrews, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Ephesians, 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, and 1<sup>st</sup> John. But this relationship is somewhat incidental, in that the Creeds were somewhat independently created. The Creeds – and most of us know about two versions, the Apostles' and the Nicene – were written before the Bible as we know it was finalized. So, how did our Creeds come about – and why is that important? The Creeds are summaries of the key beliefs that we profess to hold as Christians. To be precise, a given Creed tells us what we believe from a literal perspective, as

opposed to an abstract perspective. In other words, a Creed is not an expression of theology, of arguments about the nature of God. It is a statement about the specific facts that we agree on and that define our faith for us in a practical sense. There have been many Christian Creeds over the centuries, but two of them are by far the most prominent.

The Apostles' Creed is probably dated to sometime after 200 AD. Tradition, however, says that it was written ten days after the ascension of Jesus into Heaven – and that it was the Apostles themselves who wrote it. In truth, it was probably invented early in the third century and used as a statement of faith by new converts. The longer Creed, what we call the Nicene Creed, was created during a famous council that greatly impacted the establishment of modern Christianity. Emperor Constantine, the Emperor of the Roman Empire, called for the Council. The council was held in a city called Nicaea, in what is now the city of Iznik in Turkey. A large part of the reason for the Council was to resolve a serious conflict in the Christian Church, something that was weakening Constantine's grasp of power. As we would expect, the emperor was more concerned with power than faith, but in truth, we believe that his concerns about division within Christianity and its impact on the greater Church were sincere. The conflict was caused by the existence of an alternative form of Christianity called Arianism, which was invented by a priest named Arian; he claimed that Jesus was created by God the Father, and that he was not an eternal being, who has always existed, like God. Arian also did not

believe in the Trinity. Importantly, the Trinity is not mentioned in the Bible, not even indirectly. But most Christian scholars consider it to be strongly implied by what we find in the Gospels. Constantine wanted a single form of Christianity – and this was codified in a central product of the Council of Nicaea, that is, the Nicene Creed, which lays out the basic beliefs that we share today.

But there's another reason, besides unifying the Church under a powerful emperor, for creating a Creed. And Constantine most likely saw this as an important, if secondary, purpose of his. Remember that the early Christian world had few books and very few people who could read. The Hebrew Scriptures and pieces of the emerging New Testament Scriptures had to be hand copied and then an educated person had to be found to read them to a congregation. In an age when common people traveled by foot, this was a difficult task at times. Yet the Gospel spread quickly, without books or pamphlets or what we called catechisms - and without Bibles. Yes, the books of the Old Testament existed and there were Gospels and various letters in circulation, but all of these were limited in availability. In the early church, there weren't even widely available copies of the individual Gospels themselves. The canon, or the official Bible, didn't exist until about the year four hundred. On top of this, there were so-called "Gospels" that were very different than the four that we know well, and they taught very different forms of Christianity. Arianism wasn't the only "other" Christianity. The Word spread orally, and quite frankly, sloppily. This left room for

widely differing interpretations of Christianity, including ones that twisted the teachings of Jesus. So, there was a dire need for some sort of agreement on just what it was that Jesus taught and how it related to the Hebrew Scriptures in particular.

The main concern of the Council of Nicaea was Arianism, which denied the eternal pre-existence of God the Son, Jesus. Arianism had a very large and growing following. So, it's not surprising that the main difference between the Nicene Creed and the older Apostles' Creed – whose authorship is unknown – is that the Nicene Creed has an expanded section on the relationship between God the Father and Jesus. The Nicene Creed asserts that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he was "*begotten of the Father*", and that he was "*true God from true God*". It makes it clear just who Jesus is. By the way, that word "catholic" in both Creeds - catholic with a small c - means universal. It does not refer to what we today call the Catholic Church.

Please listen to the two Creeds:

### **The Apostles Creed**

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who  
was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the  
Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended into hell.  
The third day He arose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven*

*and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints, the  
forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body, and  
life everlasting.  
Amen.*

### **The Nicene Creed**

*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 and the Son,  
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.*  
*Amen.*

The Apostles' Creed was developed to formalize Christian beliefs in a time when there were few other documents that could be used as a standard. And the Nicene Creed was later developed to further clarify our beliefs, in particular, with respect to the nature of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God and as one member of the Holy Trinity. The Nicene Creed also has extra material on the Holy Spirit, in order to clarify the nature of the Trinity. I happen to like this part. It says:

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who  
proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son  
is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.*

Let's return to a topic that has caused great debate over the centuries. While the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament do make it clear that Jesus is God, it's not as clear that the Bible teaches us about the Trinity. There are those who claim that the Trinity was wholly invented long after Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected. But although the term isn't in the Bible, the concept, is indeed strongly suggested. Consider

Jesus' great commission to the Apostles at the tail end of the Gospel of Matthew. In the English Standard Version, it reads: 28 <sup>16</sup> *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.* <sup>17</sup> *And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.* <sup>18</sup> *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* <sup>19</sup> *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,* <sup>20</sup> *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* This clearly states that we believe in a God the Father, a God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When you take into account the fact that the Gospels make it clear that the Holy Spirit is God's presence within us, and that Jesus is also God, there is only one logical solution: God has three integrated aspects.

When I was a boy, we recited the Nicene Creed in unison frequently in grammar school, that's Catholic grades 1 to 8. It laid my faith out for me. It was crisp and poetic. I had it memorized when I was quite young. We would rattle it off without accenting any words, we knew it so well and said it so frequently. But I truly did listen to the words. I knew what I was saying. It gave me a sense of identity as a kid of faith. Perhaps we should say it every now and then here, during this service. If you have any opinion on this, please let me know. If you like the Apostles' Creed better, let me know. If we already do enough formal stuff, then that's important for me to know, too.

Some people think that the Trinity concept is unnecessarily complex, that it's too

abstract, that Christianity would be better off if we didn't focus on this. Consider this, though: First, God the Father forgives us all. Second, it was through the sacrifice of the Son Jesus that we receive God's forgiveness. And third, it is by the regenerative powers of the Holy Spirit within us that we are made whole again once we are forgiven. The job is not a hand-off, though, between three different beings, working like a track relay team. It's also not three Gods getting together at lunch and figuring out how they can work together to rescue us. I mean, God could do it alone, right, whoever God is? We believe that God is almighty. The Trinity is our way of conceptualizing the three different roles that our God takes on in our lives. One day in school, the sister teaching us asked one of us to say what the Trinity was. One girl lifted her hand in the air and said, "I know. I know." The sister called on her. The girl said, "The Trinity is three Gods all in one, not three Gods all together." Well, that said it. The sister smiled and said, "Perfect." That is indeed the answer. The Trinity is three aspects of a single God that tell us how we are saved. It makes more sense to think about God as being a Trinity, as three Gods in one, than to think of three separate beings who need to work together to get the job of salvation done. That's more of an ancient Pagan, Greek or Roman concept, human-like gods with special powers working together because no single god is powerful enough.

But in case all of this is too academic for you, I want you to know that you have John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, on your side. He wrote in the 1700s, and so his



writing is difficult to quote and explain. As a result, I'll take the liberty of summarizing what he thought in my own words and I won't quote him. He liked the two Creeds that we've talked about today. Apparently, his favorite one was the Apostles' Creed. What he didn't like was a rigid notion of faith, or at least he didn't like us focusing on it too much. His was a more holistic, personal faith. He believed that we should focus on being a true believer who loves both God and all other humans. He believed that yes, articles of faith, as in the Creeds, are important. But we should never use memorizing a Creed like I did in school as an alternative for modeling our lives after the life of Jesus. You see, that's the thing that's missing in the Creeds – the command for Christians to be humble, forgiving, empathetic, and kind to others. John Wesley felt that if your faith didn't reflect the inspiration of the Holy Spirit living within you, there was something shallow about your faith.

This is one reason why I am a Methodist today. I'm not knocking Catholicism at all, and it's certainly true that Catholic Charities do tremendous good around the world. But I like John Wesley's down-to-Earth Christianity. It says yes, believe in what's in the Creed, use it as the core of your doctrine. We decide what it means to live our individual lives like Christ. Our Creed is very basic; it tells us about our triune God, about forgiveness and everlasting life, and about the importance of belonging to a communion of faith. Indeed, the full message is incredibly powerful. Through the total forgiveness of the Father, the simple message of love and empathy from the Son,

and the burning inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we become complete Christians. We are set free to live our faith the way that we think best.

You might have forgotten that I had a rat living in my garage. Our son Julien set a trap for that rat. The poor thing was probably looking for food and a cool place to hang out in the heat of the summer. He was living off his instincts, hiding inside a little closet in our garage, chewing on the plastic handles of Julien's tools, and probably contemplating a diet enhanced with the wiring of our cars. Julien and I felt a little bad that we had to kill the pathetic little guy off. I concluded that it was necessary, of course. But we're not rats. We are thoughtful creatures. God gave us the gift of creative minds. God expects us to use them. God sets us free to think our faith through. We decide what it means to live according to our Creed, to emulate Jesus. We should enjoy that freedom and celebrate our faith. Being a human child of God is truly astonishing.

I thought Julien had killed that rat. But I found out a day or so later that he took it far from our neighborhood and set it free. Faith is a very personal thing. We cannot get caught up on formalism at the expense of ignoring our individual lives of faith. Each of us needs to proactively decide just what we must do to live out our faith in a sincere fashion. We need to keep that in mind every time we make a major decision or the smallest decision.